

The Near East in the Far East

On Islam in Indonesia

Clifford Geertz

The Occasional Papers of the School of Social Science are versions of talks given at the School's weekly Thursday Seminar. At these seminars, Members present work-in-progress and then take questions. There is often lively conversation and debate, some of which will be included with the papers. We have chosen papers we thought would be of interest to a broad audience. Our aim is to capture some part of the cross-disciplinary conversations that are the mark of the School's programs. While members are drawn from specific disciplines of the social sciences—anthropology, economics, sociology and political science—as well as history, philosophy, literature and law, the School encourages new approaches that arise from exposure to different forms of interpretation. The papers in this series differ widely in their topics, methods, and disciplines. Yet they concur in a broadly humanistic attempt to understand how—and under what conditions—the concepts that order experience in different cultures and societies are produced, and how they change.

Clifford Geertz is Professor Emeritus of the School of Social Science. He came to the School from the University of Chicago in 1970 as one of its founding members. His work has in large part inspired the interpretivist, and inter-disciplinary, bent that has come to characterize the social sciences at the Institute. As he describes in the paper presented here, his ethnographic work has focused on the role of religion, most particularly Islam, on bazaar trade, on economic development, on traditional political structures, and on village and family life in North Africa and Southeast Asia. The range of his books includes *The Religion of Java* (1960), *The Social History of an Indonesian Town* (1965), and *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). Most recently he has published *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (2000). He is at present working on the general question of ethnic diversity and its implications in the modern world.

“The Near East in the Far East” was a paper (altered somewhat in this version) that Geertz presented as the Sabbagh Lecture on Arabic Culture at the University of Arizona, Tucson in February 2000 as part of a Festschrift for Lucette Valensi that will appear soon. Valensi, a Member of the School in 1976-77, is the Director of Studies of the Institut d'Études de l'Islam et des Sociétés du Monde Musulman, which is a section of the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. She is author, among other texts, of *The Birth of the Despot: Venice and the Sublime Porte* (English translation 1993).

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Lucette Valensi's extensive work on the social history of the Mediterranean has been, for all its variety of subject and focus, almost continuously concerned with the way in which cultural forms arising within one stream of history, one historic civilization, work out when projected into the interior of another: French and Algerian, Jewish and Muslim, Iberian and Moorish, Venetian and Ottoman. Ideas, sentiments and view of life, ways of being in the world, find some of their most striking, and most diagnostic, expressions far from their point of origin: in the way they color traditions quite other than their own, live with a particular vividness in a foreign place.

I should like to use this celebratory occasion to practice the difficult art Valensi has so carefully developed, and to cross over an even greater distance and an even broader difference: the Middle East and Southeast Asia. In particular, I wish to consider the role of Islam as a projection of, for want of a better term, "Arabic Culture" or "Civilization" into the "Culture" or "Civilization" of Indonesia. This is, admittedly, a subject, at once very hard to focus, more than a bit touchy, and rather grand in scale. But, if only for those reasons, it provides a good "Valensian" subject: a familiar tradition inserted into an unfamiliar place.

Centrifugal Islam

Everyone is aware of the "international," "cosmopolitan," "transcultural" nature of Islam, and aware, too, that it has been thus virtually since its beginnings. A generation after the Prophet's death it had reached westward through Egypt to Berber North Africa, eastward through Asia Minor toward Persia and India, after which it moved on to the Malay world in the one direction and to Black Africa on the other. But through all this cultural filtering—through Turkish mysticism, through Persian ecclesiasticism, through Mughal state formation—as intense and as various as any body of thought and belief has ever passed, the fact that its mid-eastern, Arabic character and image, however overlaid, reinterpreted, and further developed, has persisted tends to go unremarked. It is more sensed than specifically inquired into, more taken for granted than examined.

One reason why this aspect of the spread of Islam, and with it of certain aspects of "Arabic culture"—a term itself a bit in need of differentiation—has been passed over, if not precisely in silence, rather on tiptoe, is the ambivalence that inevitably accompanies such a process of cultural radiation over so vast and varied an area. Those on the receiving end of the project, anxious to maintain their own originalities and claim their own contributions, to be themselves rather than somebody else, are especially wary of analyses that trace some of their most prized beliefs and institutions to foreign sources. Just about everywhere that Islam has spread beyond its Arabian and Fertile Crescent homeland, the question has arisen as to what is "Islamic" and what is "Arabic" in the civilizational conglomerate, the broad and inclusive set of beliefs and practices, values, and customs that make up *al-alam al islamiya*. Sorting out these two dimensions, the one supposedly "religious," the other supposedly "cultural," may be at bottom an impossible task, or a useless one. But that has not prevented

peoples from Morocco to Indonesia, Bangladesh to Nigeria, Turkey to Afghanistan, from trying to do it continuously, repeatedly, and without much in the way of a clear and stable resolution.

Religion in general has been one of the major mechanisms by means of which particular local cultures have projected themselves onto a larger world screen throughout the course of history. Christianity, especially under the imperialist, evangelizing impulse that gripped it after the Reformation, brought European views and values to various parts of Asia and Africa, as well as to the New World. Buddhism, the movable form of Indicism, carried aspects of South Asian sensibility over into Southeast Asia, China, and even into Japan. But Islam has been particularly effective in injecting the tone and temper of the Near East into distant contexts, as well as, what is even more important, in maintaining and reinforcing them once they were injected.

The focus on Mecca and Medina as the sacred center of Dar al-Islam and the growing importance, as communications improved over the centuries, of the hajj; the maintenance of classical Arabic in Arabic script as the sole, untranslatable language of doctrine, as well as of law, prayer, poetry, ornament, and history; the strongly literary, iconoclastic, anti-ritualizing rhetorical bent; the scripturalist revitalizations of the first half of the last century—all these rigorist, not to say purist, institutions and movements have served to keep the traditions of Arabic culture, and a good deal of its feel as well, alive within even the most seemingly uncongenial contexts: African ceremonialism, South Asian hierarchism, Southeast Asian syncretism.

I once described Islam as a religion designed for export.¹ But what it has exported is not just a creed and a world view. At least in part, the ground out of which that creed and that world view grew has been exported along with it. Even more than Christianity, with its movable partitions and its adjustable scriptures, certainly more than Buddhism, without much in the way of either primordial center or fixed scripture, Islam has carried its native coloring with it. To become Muslim has not, to be sure, meant to become Arabized. But it has meant to enter into a complex and continuing, seriously ambivalent, relation to Arabic culture.

My own interest in this issue stems mainly from my own long term field studies in two culturally quite contrastive, both to one another and to that of the Near East, non-Arabian Islamic societies. I have worked in and on Indonesia and in and on Morocco, the frontier outliers of the ummat, the Wild West and the Mysterious East, for about a half century now, playing them off, one against the other.² They make, for such purposes, a useful, unusually accommodating pair. They even manage to change regimes more or less in synch. The death of King Hassan II after thirty-seven years of rule and the fall of President Suharto, hardly less a monarch, after thirty-three, came within months of each other a couple years ago, followed in both cases by weak and hesitant reformist regimes, plagued by a rising tide of Islamist dissension and disaffection, and deepening internal confusion. Here, however, I will for the sake of brevity and clarity, examine, or rather reexamine, only the Indonesian case. The Moroccan one is in some ways even more elusive and harder to get a grip on, while seeming on the surface much the simpler of the two. But as it would take another book to deal with the two comparatively and tease out the similarities within their differences, the contrasts which connect them, I will make my more general points in connection with Indonesia, leaving to another occasion the extension of such of that as might apply to Morocco.

Niche Formation

The most distinctive aspect of the historical career of Islam in Indonesia is that, more than anywhere else, even more than in India, it inserted itself, and rather late (mostly after the fourteenth century, and most decisively only after the seventeenth and eighteenth) into an ethnically, linguistically, geographically, and religiously complex and differentiated society. There was no “virgin ground” to “civilize” here, as there was, more or less, in compact and tribalized Morocco. There was a vast, archipelagic “country” (six thousand or so islands, flung out across two million square kilometers along the equator), which was already highly developed, if very unevenly, economically, politically, and culturally.

The brute fact that strikes any observer of Indonesia, however casual and at whatever period in its history, is its extraordinary diversity, so great that it makes, and has long made, identity definition—“Who are we? Malays? Muslims? Javanese? Asians?—a central, and continually evolving concern. A few simple dates and numbers will get this across. There are fifteen reasonably sizeable and up to five hundred small, reasonably distinct groups, speaking upwards of three hundred languages. The country has been colonized, for a shorter or longer time, in part or in whole, by the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Dutch, the English, and the Japanese—and, some would say, more recently and less formally, by the Americans. Commercial influences from India, from South Arabia, and most especially from China, the famous “oriental trade,” have led to significant immigrant settlements over the whole course of its history.³

For more than a millennium, beginning about the fifth century of present era, Hindu-Buddhist civilizations (the two “religions” were barely separable then), migrant from eastern India, dominated Java, Bali, and certain regions of Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Sulawesi, leading to the construction of large, aggressive, very densely populated agrarian states focused around axis mundi symbolic capitals, mass ritual, spiritual hierarchy, and “divine” kings.⁴ From about 1400, these kingdoms were challenged by powerful polyglot, polyethnic, poly-racial Muslim principalities on Java and Sumatra, particularly along the northern coasts, spread there by a large scale, international, long distance trade florescence, running from Aden and the Red Sea eastward across the Indian Ocean and the Malabar Coast, on through the Makassar Straits and the Java Sea to the Spice Islands edging the Pacific on the east. And as first the Portuguese and then the Dutch slowly gained hegemony after the seventeenth century, the country was progressively, if quite unevenly Islamized, until today it is, at least nominally (a qualification, as we shall see, of very great importance), about 85% Muslim, 7% Protestant, 3% Catholic, 2% Hindu, 1% Buddhist, and 2% “other”—mostly local, so-called “animists” or “pagans.”

There is a great deal more to say about this formation of a highly cosmopolitan, multi-stranded, somewhat haphazard culture in what was then called, with appropriate plurality, The East Indies: about the unevenness of its distribution, about the relative weights of its various elements, and about the political and economic framework, authoritarian, imperialist, and intensely laboristic, within which it took place. But the essential point is that Islam as a religious and cultural impulse, an imported turn of mind, had to contend with a wide array of formidable competitors, within the play of which it had, as both late-coming and in general unarmed, somehow to position itself. Neither “conquest” (though there was violence enough involved) nor “colonization” (though there was some foreign settlement, mostly fugitive, here and there) are the appropriate terms for what happened in the Indies. “Niche-formation”—seeking out openings in a crowded landscape, occupying them, and then expanding them—is rather more descriptive of the advance of Islam, and with it of

Near-Eastern thought forms, in most parts of Indonesia, from its very first intrusions until today.

I will not attempt to trace out this process of niche-formation and development here in concrete detail, both because it would take too long and because it would involve a cascade of names, places, events, and personalities, some of which (Salifiyyah, the Acehese War, Hatta, Masjumi) might be generally recognizable, others of which (Hamza Fansuri, Demak, The Paderi Rebellion, Sarekat Islam) probably would not. What I want to do is outline its general shape: the institutions mediating it, the phases it has passed through, and most especially the role that Islam, with its Arabic aura and atmosphere, its echo of distant landscapes and distant tongues, has come to occupy in the ideological swirl of modern, independent Indonesia. Thus a genealogy rather more than a history: and ordering of inheritances, a sorting of traditions, an identity legend.

In these terms, I shall discuss, in turn and all too briefly, what seem to me to be three fairly readily discernable, though overlapping and intersecting, stages in this tale, not of events and personalities but of the construction of a place for Islam (and, concurrently, for the background hum of Arabic culture) in a conglomerate, Euro-Asian, or Asio-European, civilization exterior to it: (1) niche establishment, (2) niche expansion, and (3) niche consolidation. Taken together, they give a picture of what is usually called, somewhat negligently, as though it were some sort of ideological takeover by a fixed and seamless eternal vision, “the Islamization of Indonesia,” that is rather different than those given both by canonical discussions of the matter and by revisionist accounts—by orthodox stories driven by doctrinal considerations, and by neo-orthodox stories driven by political considerations. We find, instead of a growing hegemony, a growing differentiation: the development not of a common consciousness, but of a deeply, and quite possibly permanently, divided one.

Mosque, Market, and School

To begin with niche establishment, the securing of a foothold, a beachhead, a base, an enclave, the main mediating institutions aside from the Prophecy as such, were the mosque, the market, and the school: in Indonesian, the *masjid*, the *pasar*, and the *pesantren*. Together, they formed an indissoluble triad, religious, economic, and social at once, around which, in this place or the other, at that time or the other, a recognizably Muslim community, an *ummah*, could crystallize.

The close association, the symbiosis even, of trade, traders, and the spread of Islam has been often remarked, as has the accompaniment of them by the so-called “Islamic college” (Arabic, *madrasah*), in part a sect, in part a school, in part a theatre of clerical authority. From the foundation of the Prophecy at the crossroads of trade routes in the Hejaz (at least reputedly—I recognize there is dispute about the matter), though the establishment of the great cosmopolitan emporium centered on Fustat, Basra, Quyrawan, and Sijilmasa in the “Arab Middle Ages” of the tenth and eleventh centuries, to the fluorescence of the “eastern trade” through Gujarat, Malabar, Malacca, and the Spice Islands in the fifteenth and sixteenth, the persistence of this relation between the trader, the scholar, and the Friday assembly as the animating nucleus of a portable Islam is clear and unmistakable. So far as Indonesia is concerned, the growth and proliferation of the intensely cosmopolitan port kings, sometimes called “Bazaar States,” I alluded to a moment ago—Arabs, Turks, Persians, Chinese, Gujarati, Tamils, Javanese, Bugis, Malays, after awhile Portuguese and Hollanders, all tumbled in together, peddling cloth, spices, jewelry, slaves, cosmetics, and foodstuffs in a

sliding-price marketplace—provided precisely the sort of fluid, decentralized, intensely competitive far-eastern environment in which this near-eastern form could project itself, defend itself, and, in time, expand.⁵

In itself, this establishment of a Muslim quarter (called, usually, a *kauman*, Malay from Arabic, *qawm* for “nation,” “people,” “ethnos”) grouped around a mosque and instructed by itinerant charismatics, was hardly a matter of Arab incursion and settlement. Only a handful of Arab traders, Hadraumatis from what is now southern Yemen mostly, proceeded very far along the Alexandria, Aden, Cambay, and Makassar sea-highway before the beginning to the nineteenth century, though a fair number did so afterwards. Crowded with Persians, Turks, Indians, and, increasingly Malays and Javanese—all Muslims, if rather different sorts of Muslims—the *kauman*, within which a commercial pidgin called “bazaar Malay” became the language of communication as Arabic was the language of prayer, was as culturally pluralistic as the society that surrounded it. It was less set off from that society than a component of it; a community among communities.

The next stage, “niche expansion,” consisted of, first, the increasing relative importance of the Muslim element within the bazaar states to the point where rulers who had been called “rajah,” or some such name, without changing their general cultural dress and outlook very drastically, and their mode of operation hardly at all, came to be called “sultan,” or some such; and then, second, and much more critically, the movement, slow, hesitant, and very uneven, of the mosque-market-school complex into the agrarian heartlands of the larger islands, Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Sulawesi. The formation of a distinctive commercial culture—mobile, Malay-speaking, at least superficially Muslim—around “Asia’s Mediterranean,” the Java Sea, led to an extended, intense, and curiously indecisive struggle between it and the interior principalities—large, immobile, feudal, and Indic—a struggle further complicated by the increasing prominence of first the Portuguese and then the Dutch in the coastal emporium. Again, it is not possible to trace the progress of this from-the-edges-inward transformation of Indonesian society and culture here: it is both too complex and too incompletely understood. Suffice it to say that from the sixteenth through the eighteenth century, and on into the nineteenth, the sort of encapsulated Islam characteristic of the bazaar-state *kaumans* worked its way into most parts of the archipelago at the same time as it was being transformed into a systematically exploited and bureaucratically governed European colony.⁶

The Pesantren Complex

The fact, and it is a fact, that Islam proceeded across Indonesia under the umbrella of Dutch hegemony, that it was, however accidentally, the historical beneficiary of an imposed, self-distancing imperial government bent on engrossment and export, has been somewhat obscured in recent discussions, when it hasn’t been actively concealed. In great part, this is a result of the post-colonial desire, understandable enough in itself, to portray the colonial period as one in which the distinction between the intrusive and the indigenous was culturally clear and spiritually absolute; that insofar as the two were connected it was in terms of otherness and opposition, as separate, dissociated worlds, only antagonistically, and unequally, interacting. This is simply not true. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Indonesia saw the construction of a Euro-Asian (or, again, Asio-European) society with a form, an outline, and a content of its own, a society whose main difference from what preceded it, and, indeed, from what followed it, was the configuration of its variousness. And it was within that society, the unfolding “Indies,” sprawled and irregular

but increasingly interconnected, that Indonesian Islam found its fixed, expandable niche.

The Dutch transformation of a string of tribes and islands flung out along the equator into a hierarchy of provinces and departments, and the attendant reduction, one after the other, of all the indigenous states and polities from one end of the archipelago to the other, provided an ordered, intelligible landscape, blocked out regions and culture areas—official “peoples”—across which the mosque-market-school complex could more easily move, navigate, and settle. It established itself as the primary mediator of Islamic fidelity and the Near Eastern connection, one after the other, in virtually all of the densely populated irrigated rice-growing regions, the settings within which the Indic agrarian states and statelets had arisen before them: central and eastern Java, west and northeast Sumatra, southeast Kalimantan, southern Sulawesi.⁷

The standard pattern, replicated again and again throughout the archipelago in more or less invariant form, was the foundation of what came to be known as a *pesantren*, literally a place for peripatetic Islamic students, or *santri*, traveling about in search of *‘ilm*, religious knowledge or illumination. But a *pesantren* was more than an educational institution, a clerical academy concerned with the formal propagation of doctrine. A typical *pesantren* consisted (and consists: the country is still dotted with them, and they continue to provide the greater part of the institutional substructure of Indonesian Islamism) of a small, marked off, usually rural estate, located at the edge of a village or in the open field between villages: an Arcadian complex of: (1) a mosque, simple or elaborate, composite in style; (2) a home, usually spacious, for the religious leader (the *‘alim*, or *kiyayi*, or *ustad*), who is in most cases a *haji*, a returned Meccan pilgrim; and (3) anywhere from one or two to a dozen or more open-veranda dormitories called *pondok* (from Arabic *funduq*, “inn,” “hospice,” “caravansary”) in which the students, anywhere from a half dozen to several hundred, virtually all of them at this period male, lived. There were also often various workshops, fields, and so on attached to the *pesantren*, dedicated to it as a religious foundation—a *waqf*.

The students ranged from mere children of eight or nine to mature or even elderly men, though the great majority were adolescents or young adults. They cooked their own food, washed their own clothes, worked in the fields and workshops, traveled about the area as tailors, tinkers, mendicants, and market peddlers. Some stayed a month, some stayed for years. They were free to move from one *pesantren* to the next in order to study with other teachers and earn certificates (*ijazah*) in particular branches of religious learning, though the ties with their original teacher, continuously renewed with gifts and visits at the *‘ayad*, the Muslim high holidays, were considered almost supernaturally unbreakable. The teaching took place in the mosque. As, at least until recently, few of the *santris* knew much Arabic, it consisted of the *‘alim* (who may not always have known that much either) reading from the Quran, a *hadith* collection, or some *fiqh* text or other; or, in some instances, where Sufi orders—Shattari, Qadari, Naqshbandi—had penetrated, from *tariqah* devotional manuals. The *‘alim* offered vernacular explications and commentaries as he went, which the *santris*, echo-chanting the text, noted in its margins, and memorized, after which the *‘alim* signed the *ijazah* appropriate to that text for those students whom he deemed to have mastered it.⁸

In such a manner, step by step, over the course of three centuries, the partially sighted leading the largely blind, a *pesantren* network was established through the whole of the western part of the archipelago and, more sporadically, in the eastern, following along and constructing the local networks of cyclic, “solar system” markets that intensifying mercantile intrusion induced just about everywhere. The individual *pesantren* differed widely in size and importance; they waxed and waned, arose and disappeared, with the renown and fortunes, never that secure, of their *‘alim*. But as the number of pilgrims, and of richer traders and

landowners who could afford to be pilgrims, grew ever greater, especially after the beginning of the nineteenth century when the Dutch had made the sea lanes secure (Snouck Hurgronje reports hundreds of “Javans,” the largest foreign contingent there, studying in Mecca in the 1880s, often for years at a time), the number of *pesantren*, and the number of *santri*, also grew until today there are an estimated forty thousand such schools with perhaps eight million or so students.⁹ What started out as Muslim *kauman*-type niches in the multicultural bazaar states spread, on the backs of trade, discipleship, and restricted literacy, through the whole of the multicultural archipelago. Today, “santri” has become the general term, just about everywhere in the islands, for an observant Muslim, a strict, as opposed to a casual, a nominal, or, as the current idiom has it, a “statistical” adherent of Islam.

But however extensive this net, it remained, and remains, a niche, however large and internally developed, within the broader, motley and miscellaneous Indonesian society. By those same 1880s, when the Meccan connection was up and running, cosmopolitanizing a clerical elite, just about every major religious, or religio-cultural, tradition was to be found somewhere in the islands. The Dutch presence, in itself quite secular, facilitated the addition of Christianity, Protestant primarily, but as time passed Roman Catholic as well, to the mix. Important Christian enclaves were founded in east-central Sumatra, where German Lutherans were active, north Celebes, where Dutch Calvinists were, and various competing micro-denominations, of the sort the Netherlands was so fertile in producing, settled into one or another parts of the Lesser Sundas, the Moluccas, and New Guinea declared open by the colonial government to missionization. Like Islam, Christianity in Indonesia was a matter of marked out moral communities, some of them sizeable. But unlike Islam, the communities were separate and discontinuous, neither commercially, nor organizationally, nor culturally interconnected.

Beyond these, there was the Chinese minority, also grown large, and to a degree prosperous, under Dutch domination, set apart, mostly in towns and cities in a Sinic, dialect-divided world. There was a whole series of small, but often quite elaborate, Malayo-Polynesian tribal traditions, up-country particularisms unabsorbed into broader unities. And, most important, there was a large, unorganized mass of nominal, “statistical” Muslims—rather more, I would guess, though this can only be a guess, than half of the whole—eclectic in outlook, relaxed in creed, and syncretistic in practice, whose relation to the *pesantren* tradition and the Arabic aura it projected was at best nervous and mistrustful, and worse nervous and hostile. By the opening of the last century, the trans-local collective identities, the contrastively phrased religious and cultural *familles d’esprit*, that would confront one another in the illusory, and as it turned out fragile, uniformities of nationalism were already in place.

Nationalism, Reformism, and the Question of Identity

It is not possible to trace the development of the other constituents of the Indonesian assemblage. . .or collage. . .or miscellany. . .here, nor to describe their individual force and content with any specificity. I have attempted elsewhere something of this sort, just for Java, where I distinguished three such constituents: (1) the syncretic folk tradition of the peasantry, usually called *abangar*; (2) the Arabo-Indonesia (or Indo-Arabian) *santri* tradition I have been here discussing; and (3) a more self-consciously Indic, quasi-theosophical, illuminationist one, sometimes called Javanist, sometimes *priyayi*, after the Dutch-educated native civil servants who were, and whose successors are, its main exponents.¹⁰ Others have essayed similar enterprises, with similar, or at least comparable, demarcations elsewhere. But

most of the sorting out and specifying work, the identification of subnational but superlocal identity frames, which are, to my mind, the fundamental elements of whatever cohesion—in the nature of the case never much more than partial and never much less than tense—Indonesia displays, remains to be done, and I would not want to deny that there is broad room for argument on such matters. What is clear, nonetheless, is that, however such frames are defined and characterized, in this place or that, or whatever the overall inventory of them may turn out to be, they came into more and more direct and intimate conflict, one with the next, with the rise of nationalism and, most especially with the institution of the fragile and composite Republic, unitary only in name, that the clashes and insurrections of the end-of-the-war forties forced rather suddenly into being.

Insofar as religion is concerned, the entire history of the national struggle, which gets seriously underway in the nineteen-tens and twenties (there were, of course, foreshadows and adumbrations—protests, jacqueries, millennial enthusiasms—well before that), was an effort not so much to separate the identity frames, spiritual families, cultural positionings, or whatever, clearly out one from the other, to sort them into fixed, walled-off compartments. They were far too mixed and shape-shifting, and rather too interested in one another, for that. It represented an attempt either to institute some sort of moving balance among them according to their relative strengths and conflicting demands, also moving, or more radically, and as it turned out disastrously, to establish the clear and certain dominance of one or another of them over all of the others. Nationalism disturbed, and in the event destroyed, the external and arbitrary, essentially racial division of rights, powers, and opportunities under which the East Indies functioned by bringing the “who are we?” question into intense, unavoidable, and unavoidably political, focus. If there was to be an Indonesian people—one Indonesian people, as the barricades slogan, “One Country, One Language, One People,” had it—then the religio-cultural pluralism inherited from the previous three centuries of accelerating change and differentiation had to be confronted. Its terms had to be reset, its boundaries redefined, its weights recalibrated. And that did not prove as easy to do as it was to desire.¹¹

Nor was the task made any easier by the fact that at the same time as nationalism (secular, egalitarian, and radically unitary in its aims and institutions) took hold in the archipelago, religious reformism was setting in with similar determination in the Arabic-speaking Near East, a development that began soon afterward, via the usual connections (the *haji*, study at Al-Azhar, the increasingly important religious press, and so on) to have an abrupt and tearing impact on the Indonesian *santri* community. The writings and teachings of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, and others in the so-called *salafiyah* movement just before and just after the turn of the nineteenth century, a bookish and to some degree internally contra-dictory movement which, in Ira Lapidus’s words, “combined the reformist principles—return to the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet, the right of independent judgment in religious matters, abandonment of a stifling conformity to out-moded tradition, and opposition to cultic Sufi practices—with a modernist responsiveness to the political and cultural pressures of Europe,” induced a pervasive and deep-going tension, rising at times to open conflict, into *santri* Islam.¹² I have described this development at some length, not only for Indonesia, but for Morocco, where it was at least as consequential and tradition-disruptive, under the rubric of “scripturalism,” (a term I still prefer to the usual alternatives: “fundamentalist,” “reformist,” “modernist”) elsewhere, and I will not repeat that discussion here.¹³ Suffice it to say that, running alongside and in complex relation to the rise of nationalist agitation, intensified urbanization, and the steady erosion of the Dutch hold on things, the scripturalist incursion, something new out of the Middle East, divided

the Indonesian *ummah*, as it divided that of the Arab heartland, into reformist and traditionalist, or perhaps more accurately, integralist and pluralist, camps.

Simplifying (again!) a story that will not really simplify, as urbanization increased, contact with Europeans and with European ideas intensified, and commercial life migrated more and more emphatically town-wards, a part of the community migrated with it to establish a scripturalist presence—a new Arabism in a new niche. The organizational vehicle of this re-statement and re-institutionalization of things emphatically Muslim, was a large, and as it soon became, nationwide social welfare organization called Muhammadiyah. Founded by urban merchants, mullahs, and mosque officials in the former Indic capital, Yogyakarta, in 1912, and claiming, by century's end, more than twenty-five million members, it set up clinics, orphanages, youth groups, women's organization, relief depots, and most critically, graded, professionally taught Western-style schools offering systematic, Indonesian-language instruction in secular subjects side by side with, also rather more systematized, less cultic Islamic ones.¹⁴ And in response, both to it and to the increasing power of the nationalist movement as such, a number of *pesantren* 'ulema in the east and central Javanese countryside (including, most notably, the grandfather of the recent, and recently displaced, President of the country) set up a counter organization called Nahdatul Ulama—"The Renaissance of the Religious Teachers." Dedicated to the preservation and extension of the *pesantren* way of life, and to the traditionalistic, and by now quite Indonesianized, conception of Islamic piety that flourished there, it too spread and grew extremely rapidly to become, at upwards of thirty million members, what is said to be the largest Muslim organization in the world.¹⁵

The following decades, the nineteen forties, fifties, and sixties (the years of the Japanese Occupation; of the Revolution; of the Sukarno-Hatta balanced-ticket Republic; of the formation of impassioned, belief-driven national parties; of the first general election pitting these parties against one another as radical, "if we win it's our country" alternatives; of the institution, when the elections only reinforced hostilities; of "guided," that is manipulated, "democracy," trying to smooth it all over with rhetoric and symbolics; of the descent into popular massacre, a hundred thousand? five hundred thousand? three-quarters of a million? people killed or exiled, when it wouldn't smooth; of the emergence of the Suharto autocracy from the rubble, calming things for the moment by fastening a military clamp on them) have been often and for the most part well-chronicled, and so have the ups and downs throughout it all of the *santri* community. Suffice it to say that the immediately post-colonial years saw both the headlong politicization and ideologization of all the constituents of the *assemblage*, and a series of failed attempts, bloody and spectacular, to contain them within some sort of larger consolidative order. (The Cold War further complicated the picture, projecting Communism into the mix, as did, from the other side of the ledger, another disturbance out of the heartland, the appearance on the local scene of the totalistic sort of Islamism associated with Wahabbism and the Muslim Brotherhood: Sayyid Qutb, Hasan al-Banna', Hasan al-Turabi, and so on). By 1998, when Suharto, his manipulative eclecticism, corrupt a bit here, oppress a bit there, smile benignly, exhausted in its turn, fell, the very permanency of the country, its continued integrity, seemed at risk; the "who are we?" question near to beyond answering.

Permanent Pluralism?

An anthropologist who works on a particular country for a half-century, the span of both its career as an aspiring state and his own as an aspiring scholar, leads an awkward life. He has

continually to revise his perception of his “object of study,” which is, anyway, not an “object” in the first place, but a massive, turbulent subjectivity caught up in a no less turbulent encompassing world. But he has, also and at the same time, to maintain a vision of that object steady and crystalline enough to say something general and intelligible about it, something not entirely trapped within the immediacies of the present moment. Changing your views in public is embarrassing enough, especially when those views have been forcefully stated. Reasserting them, unchastened and unchanged, after ruin, upheaval, and all sorts of accident have intervened, is even more so. But this is the predicament in which longtime observers of Indonesia, all we would-be Myrdals or Crèvecoeurs, Tocquevilles or Bryces, anxious to sum up other people’s lives and prospects, now find ourselves caught.

The change, the ruin, the upheaval, and the accident, is particularly visible at the moment, after the so-called “Asian crisis” of 1998 (a sixteen percent drop in GDP, twenty million unemployed) and the nervous relaunching of party-based electoral government; and the scholarly ethos, not only of the anthropology profession, but of the whole of the human sciences right now, directs us toward an intense, at time it seems a nearly exclusive concern with it. Like journalists, we seem powerfully attracted to the idea that we are responsible for writing the first draft of history, or for concocting a plausible account of tomorrow’s weather out of the evidence of today’s precipitation. There are, in themselves, reasonable endeavors (though we get rained on a lot), hardly avoidable, occasionally useful. But, at the same time, Indonesia has by now been around long enough, not just as a culture and a colony but as an autonomous state and would-be nation, for us to begin to essay some views as to what some of the abiding characteristics of this “object” might be, to provide a sketch at least, to change the metaphor to something I am more comfortable with, and that fits rather better with our Arabist concerns, of the figure in the carpet.

The figure I think I see, or glimpse, or imagine, and which I have been trying, rather breathlessly, to sketch here, is one of a foundational diversity—hundreds of landscapes, languages, peoples, regimes, faiths, economies, forms of life, ways of being in the world—only made more diverse, and more ineluctable, as time has passed and modernity, at least tentatively, appeared. Such a conception runs counter, I realize, to the highly integralist views of Indonesia, nationalist and sectarian, cultural and religious, political and psychological, that have come by now to be conventional wisdom, both inside the country and outside it. The country, and I think it genuinely a country—a bounded field of love and contention, a habitat, a homeland, a *heimat*, a *patria*, a place to remember and to long for—is built on difference, and on the sufferance of difference. All attempts to disguise that fact, or to deny it—radical nationalism, radical Islamism, radical leftism, most recently, radical developmentalism, perhaps next, radical localism—are, and consistently have been, non-starters, recipes for cataclysm, short and long term.

It is as a differences among differences, a particularity among other such particularities, that I have sought, both here and generally, to portray Islam in Indonesia. Seeing it as a weaving of (some aspects of) “Arabic Culture” into a carpet already dense with foreign forms and figurations, is of course not the only way to see it. For some, indeed, and particularly lately, as a certain neo-scholastic, sometimes called “substantialist” revisionism, an effort to create a social theology, has set in both among some Western educated *santris* and some anxious-to-help foreign scholars, this way of looking at things is regarded, when it isn’t considered anti-Islamic altogether, to be oblivious to the increasing prominence of “genuine” Muslim commitment in Indonesian life since the mid-sixties and early seventies, its steady progress toward political, social, and spiritual hegemony. Perhaps this is so, but I am not persuaded that such a progress is underway or, that if it is underway, that it is progress. Any

attempt to proceed on the basis that it is, that religious wholeness, and with it cultural wholeness, is finally withing reach, that “the Islamization of Indonesia” is finally at hand, will end no better than all the other efforts to fasten a settled personality upon he country. It does not have such a personality, it does not need one, and, in my view anyway, it is not, at least not soon, perhaps not ever, going to get one. It is not just locally, accidentally, and temporarily pluralist. It is, to commit a philosophical solecism and a political truth, pervasively, essentially, and permanently so.

If this is true, then reflections about the future based on the past, about what direction things might henceforth move, given how they have done so heretofore and where they now seem to stand, take a surprising turn. The most striking aspect of the present scene in Indonesia, as anyone who reads the newspapers, or even the headlines, will know (IS INDONESIA BREAKING DOWN?. . . BALKANIZATION OF INDONESIA MAY BE FAR FROM HYPOTHESIS. . . ONE COUNTRY OR MANY?), is the accelerating spread of scission and separatism, the upsurge of micro-violence and capsule war. Aceh, Ambon, West Kalimantan, Irian, the Moluccas. Not all of this is religiously inspired, of course, but none of it is free of echoes and resonances of the niche-building history I have been describing. The niche/*familles d’esprit/assemblage* way of putting a society together, and a polity to govern it, may be, now that iron-hand modes of rule—colonial, demagogic, military—have, for the moment anyway, been set aside as unworkable and worse, nearing something of a testing point: Can a nation thus conceived long endure? Is it even a nation? Need it be?

Only—as sightless seers, eyeless in Gaza, always say when they would to escape from a discourse they know how to launch but not how to get out of—only time will tell. What is clear, even to seers, however, is that the present moment in Indonesian history, and the history of Islam and the Arabic register within Indonesian history, is a particularly decisive one, one on which rather more depends than immediate result and short run direction. There have been such moments before, of course. Eighteen-thirty, when colonialism congealed, was one. Nineteen-forty-five, when the Revolution began, was another. But there has been none more critical in the determination of the very viability of so various, ill-coordinated, and multiplex an actor (it has been compared at times both to a headless centipede and to an elephant with beri-beri) in the modern world of unit states, hierarchic power-blocs, and hegemonic ambitions.

What is clear, insofar as anything is clear, is that some of the shapes of our common future, which grows more common by the day, will find their first expression in Indonesia, and other centipede and elephant countries—Nigeria, Southern Africa, the South Asian subcontinent, Brazil—over the rest of this just-born century. Finding a political, social, and cultural form within which so internally diverse a country can function and sustain a workable identity, will be neither quick nor easy, neither merely linear nor free of violence and other disorders. It took three hundred unquiet years (if one starts one’s counting with Westphalia and finishes it at the Risorgimento) to evolve and implant the sovereign, and enfolded, nation-state in Europe, an achievement promptly followed by two world wars. And to construct a successor, if one is to be found, better adapted to the realities of a fluid, uncentered, thoroughly mixed up, improvisational world—what I have elsewhere called “the world in pieces”—will hardly be quicker, easier, or less troubled.¹⁶

Whatever new sort of something new comes out of Indonesia in the years and decades ahead, an I am persuaded that something will, pretty or unpretty, it is virtually certain that the *santri* tradition, and with it the long-distance resonances of Arabic culture, will be centrally involved. The ascent to the presidency of the Republic of that quicksilver grandson of the founder of Nahdatul Ulama, Abdurrahman Wahid, however brief it turned out to

be, places that tradition (he was born and grew up in his grandfather's and father's east Javanese *pesantren*, studied in Cairo and Baghdad), at the very center of Indonesian political life for virtually the first time.¹⁷ Whether and how long it stays there remains to be seen, besieged as it is from all sides, religious and secular alike. But its force, and the force of the *santri* tradition in all of its varying forms and directions, will surely be deeply implicated in whatever emerges: nationalist reaction, national dissolution, or (dare we hope?) a new form of architecture, a change of heart.

And so far as Arabic culture is concerned, it may well be that its nature, its power, its possibilities, and its limitation will be as clearly exposed in the distant environs to which it has migrated, largely in the casements of Islam, as it is in Arabia, Egypt, and The Fertile Crescent. The study of culture, too, needs to be dispersed and deparochialized, set free of origins, totality, and the will to purity. Looking obliquely at the edges of things, where they come together with other things, can tell you as much about them, often, as can looking at them directly, intently, and straight on.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Geertz, C., *The Religion of Java* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1960).
- 2 See, inter alia, Geertz, C., *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).
- 3 On the history of the Asian trade in the Indonesian archipelago, see van Leur, J.C., *Indonesian Trade and Society: Essays in Asian Social and Economic History* (The Hague and Bandung: W. Van Hoeve 1955).
- 4 On such states, see Schrieke, B.J.O., "Ruler and Realm in Early Java," in *Indonesian Sociological Studies*, vol. Two (The Hague and Bandung: W. Van Hoeve ,1957); for a (late) example, Geertz, C., *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). See also Pigeaud, Th., *Java in the Fourteenth Century: A Study in Cultural History* (The Hague and Bandung: M. Nijhoff, 1960-62).
- 5 On the bazaar states, see Schrieke, B.J.O., "The Shifts in Political and Economic Power in the Indonesian Archipelago in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century" (sic), in *Indonesian Sociological Studies*, vol. One (The Hague and Bandung: W. Van Hoeve, 1955).
- 6 For a general history of East Indies formation and development, see Vlekke, B., *Nusantara: A History of the East Indian Archipelago* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press , 1943).
- 7 Bali was, and still, being "Hindu," is the exception to all this. The reason for its relative isolation from this development are complex, but the absence of good harbors on the Java Sea side of the island was surely of importance.
- 8 On the *pesantren* complex in Indonesia generally, see Abaza, M., "Madrasah," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). For some concrete examples, Geertz, *The Religion of Java*. *Pesantren* teaching, though mainly oral, was not entirely so: a written tradition of Malay and Javanese language commentaries in Arabic script, which at least some of the students could read, grew up. See van Bruinessen, M., *Kitab Kuning: Pesantren dan Tarekat* (Bandung, 1995).
- 9 Hurgronje, C. Snouck, *Mekka in the Latter Part of the Nineteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill 1931). The estimate of the present number of *pesantren* is from Abaza, "Madrasah."
- 10 Geertz, *Religion of Java*. See also Geertz, C., *The Social History of an Indonesian Town* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press ,1965).
- 11 On the history of nationalism in Indonesia, see Kahin, G., *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1952).
- 12 Lapidus, I., *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.568.
- 13 Geertz, C., *Islam Observed*.
- 14 On Muhammadiyah, see Peacock, J., *Muslim Puritains: Reformist Psychology in Southeast Asian Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press,1978); Noer, D., *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia, 1900-1942* (Singapore and New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).
- 15 On Nahadatul Ulama, see Hefner, R., *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

- 16 Geertz, C., "The World in Pieces," in *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
- 17 For a brief account of his ascent to the Presidency, see Geertz, C., "Indonesia: Starting Over," *New York Review of Books*, May 11, 2000.

