

# Syncretism of Islam and Javanism

Siti Aliyuna Pratisti

Department of International Relation, Faculty of Social and Political Science,  
Universitas Padjadjaran Bandung, Indonesia  
aliyuna@unpad.ac.id

**Abstract**— Islamic studies have its own dynamics in the Javanese tradition. Islam sharing its space with cultural values that have rooted in Javanese traditions. This intersection raises an interesting variant of Islam, but the debate about whether Islamic Javanism is also Islam continues to color the development of Islam in Java. This study will examine various interpretations to present the main ideas about Kejawen Islam. It will also explore how the syncretism of Islam in Java produces a culture of tolerance through an understanding of ethical relativism in the context of Javanese culture, which is now increasingly eroded from people's memories.

**Keywords**— cultural diffusion; ethical relativism; syncretism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

It is commonly known, that community who lived in the seashore, bear the character of flexibility toward cultural changes, compared to those who lived in a landlocked situation. This character is the result of intense contact with peoples from a different part of the world since harbors play a major role in trade and also in cultural diffusion amongst natives and traders. Nusantara itself – an ancient name for archipelago lays from Sabang to Merauke before the concept of Indonesia constitutionally used – has been known for centuries as a center for spices trading and transit harbor. Indian is one of the first traders who interact with Nusantara since the early centuries. They bring culture and religion (Hinduism and Buddhism) along with carpets and silks [1, p. 11]. In the late of 15th century, the power of Hinduism and Buddhism began to collapse as Majapahit's prominent King, Hayam Wuruk and his vice-regent, Gajah Mada, passed away. The crisis also worsens by wars between smaller kingdoms who demand separation from Majapahit's power. The collapse of the Majapahit marked the receding of Hinduism and Buddhism in Java and gave way to the new emerging power based on Islamic thread, Demak—which become then extcenter of political and activity of Islamic movement in Java. But the

The spread of Islam as the new religion in Java did not negate the tradition based on Hinduism and Buddhism which had deeply rooted in Javanese culture. The intertwined of these cultures and religions, coupled with the inclusion of a Christianity introduced by the Europeans, has given Nusantara a multicultural persona, where multiple cultures and religions

intertwined, as what we embrace now as Indonesia.

A specific persona which shaped by an intercultural cross between Islam and Old Javanese Tradition famously conceptualized as “Islam Kejawen”. The concept has been studied in numerous research by scholars – a wide landscape of study, extend from the arrival of Islam in Java to the latest dynamic in the twenty-first century. But this quantity of study has not solved the continuing debate on Islam Kejawen which centered in two dividing paradigms holds widely on their views of what Islam Kejawen exactly is. The first paradigm features the separation of religion and culture, with bold idiom: "that Islam and Kejawen are entirely separated principle", they stand for the purity of Islam and the elimination of Kejawen practice in society. While the second paradigm put the perspective of syncretism, where Islam and Javanese traditions have blended perfectly as we know today. These two paradigms represent opposite polar on the general view about Islam Kejawen in Java community – that gives the cultural persona of Islam Kejawen, the various different color of understanding. Apart from the different views on Kejawen Islam, the syncretism that symbolizes the union of two cultures – namely Islam and Java – can become a mirror in understanding the issues of pluralism nowadays. A revisit to truce and tolerance that has been achieved for centuries is now increasingly eroded by the clash of various identities.

## II. METHOD

The term ethnographic pluralism is used by Hairus Salim to describe the diversity of interpretations in the study of Kejawen Islam [2, pp. v-xi]. While the word ethnography refers to the method used in the study of society with the direct involvement of researchers in everyday life in order to capture the meaning in cultural and social activities (Brewer, 2000: 10). In Indonesia itself, the study of religion has received much attention from orientalism researchers who entered the country along with Dutch occupation in Indonesia. The ethnographic study of Java itself has never lacked any interest, some of which are best known, among others, Clifford Geertz, P.J. Zoetmulder, Niels Mulder, Andrew Beatty, Mark Woodward, Paul Stange, Elizabeth Inandiak, as well as Franz Magnis-Suseno - the names are in conjunction with researchers who articulate their own culture; Simuh, Koentjaraningrat, Supratikno Rahardjo, Rahmat Subagya and

Harun Hadiwijono. This board reading of Javanese culture, resemble the variation of the later discussion - from literary, ethical, political, to religious - but also in different interpretations. This is what Salim calls "ethnographic pluralism," when the truth of one interpretation is in contrast to other interpretive truths - and in the study of Islam of Kejawen, the plurality of ethnography is apparent [2, p. vi].

### III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### A. Islam and Syncretism in Java

The history of Islam in Java is a story of assimilation. The spread of Islam in Nusantara came in two models of diffusion. The first wave is brought by merchants of Gujarat across the Hindia Ocean. Islam itself is not originated in Gujarat but spread from Saudi Arabia across the continent. Therefore, the form of Islam which came to Java has long coexisted and assimilate with the Hindu culture in India. The second wave of Islam in Java comes from Persian – Islamic values with strong features of Sufism [1, p. 378]. These two character has made Islam easily accepted in Java culture – since both are sharing a similar perspective in viewing the Universe (in Islam Kejawen we recognize the term “Manunggaling Kawula Gusti”, the process of becoming one with the universe). Woodward (1999) called the process of assimilation as a "variant" – difference appreciation of religion in accordance the culture in which it developed. The appreciation only can be understood through the conception of ethical relativism, a truce from various culture to accept one and another.

The term ethical relativism proposed by Ruth Benedict[3] when she explained the social system and its values on daily practice. She found an integrated pattern – a pattern resulted from a selective process in designing culture. According to Benedict, the society plays a major role in the process, they determined which values are fit to the needs and which does not. On this pattern, ethics and morality are very much dependent on the historical context and the cultural environment [3, p. 1]. Understanding these conceptions, mean that we also could understand how Javanese shaped Islam Kejawen according to the ethics they believed – but the ethics itself is relative, therefore the understanding varies. Islam in Java also undergo the process of selection – clear examples can be traced in how Islam influenced the Kings and the Lords of Java through Sufism, a variant of Islam which affiliated with cosmos and mysticism, a concept which has deeply rooted in Java society. The similarity of this pattern has made Islam passed through the cultural selection among the elites. Economic system also play an important role in spreading of Islam, also the marriage system which strengthening the influence of Islam among the elites – which ultimately gave way to a influence the whole society since the general public found it easier to interact with the elite when they shared the

same religion, which is Islam [4, p. 5]. On the other hand, the spread of Islam also performed by Wali Songo through the practice of Sharia teaching (the law of Islam). These two different approaches eventually formed the known pattern of Islamic communities in Java today – Abangan (mysticism) and Santri (Shariah Law).

Syncretism Itself defined as a mixture of two culture and formed a new variant differ from its origin. At one point, syncretism in Java can show us how tolerance is practiced, such as Sekaten, the celebration of Prophet Muhammad's Birthday in traditional Javanese traits. Held every 12th of Rabiul Awal of Hijriah, Sekaten celebrates with offerings – a ritual that.

resembles a pantheistic ritual rather than Islam. Another syncretism is featured in Pilgrim for the dead relatives, which also regarded in various ways – to some, it is permitted and to some, it is forbidden. Similarly in Slametan, a communal event with symbolic ritual both of Islam and Kejawen – is regarded as a vital element to maintain the harmony of society. In addition to these rituals, syncretism of Islam and Kejawen is also appears in Suluk or Script from classical poets such as Ranggawarsita and The Script of Chentini (in which contain the exposure of moral relativism in Java community).

A view of Islam diffusion in Javanese society is term as Modern Kejawen by Paul Stange. In Stange's commentary, Islam in Java does not function as an exclusive religion - the presence of Islam in Java actually strengthens Kejawen with new discourse without having to replace it [4, p. 1]. In the conclusion of this dualism, Stange emphasizes that the Javanese understanding of the relationship of Islam and Javanism can only be seen from the form of deep appreciation of the values of both, and not from the point of religious ritual. In general, Stange describes the Javanese, like most religious borrowers everywhere, would accept Islam in its own sense while maintaining the continuity of its old teachings [4, p. 5], a statement that could reinforce the idea that any religion entering the land of Java would pull into the cosmic circle of values and *kejawen* traditions.

Another prominent study of Java is done thoroughly by Koentjaraningrat (1994). In his study, he conceived Jawi religion as a form of Islamic syncretism and Kejawen, although in some societies only appeared in nominal Islamic form, appreciation and religiosity were central to Javanese society [5, p. 311]. The description of Koentjaraningrat reinforces the view that Islam Jawa does not appear as a single frame of ideas, so ethical relativism is clearly necessary to embrace the multidimensional concept of Islam in Java. From this point on, we will enter the work of various other authors referring to the in-depth discussion of Javanese traditions, such as wayang and mysticism, to understand how religious interpretations can assimilate within a culture.

### B. Truce and Tolerance: A Revisit

The religion of Java by Clifford Geertz[6] is one of the classic commentaries on Islam and Kejawen. The book was first published in 1960 and paved the way for the complexity of Javanese culture. The term "Islam Kejawen" is not found in this book because Geertz describes that Javanese society is divided into three groups, namely (i) abangan, a group that runs kejawen value purely, (ii) santri, ie groups puritanically pursuing Islam, and (iii) priyayi, a group that holds close to the values of nobility and spirituality. From Geertz's interpretation, there is a strict separation between the values of one group and another - from his research in Mojokerto, Geertz found that the value of Abangan and Islam is often contradictory in everyday practice, for example in rituals of worship or in ordinances of celebration. This contradictory bring to the conclusion that then becomes a common view and well know verse: santri versus abangan. Geertz's research on religion in Java has a strong influence both in religious studies or cultural analysis by subsequent researchers. But Geertz's interpretation is not without criticism, and although Geertz succeeds in lay out the foundation of the classical paradigm of Javanese society, another commentary comes with a narrative that is no less powerful.

Another view of Islam and *Kejawen* comes through the work of an anthropologist named Andrew Beatty entitled Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account. Through his book, Beatty criticized two critical points in Geertz's interpretation of religion in Java, the critique of the priyayi concept, which is more of a social-strata than the religious values of *abangan* and *santri*, as well as criticism of the strict separation of *santri* and *abangan* - because according to Beatty, Values between the two groups are ambivalent, and can not be categorized as oppositional forms [7, p. 115]. This ambivalent nature arises in the practice of Islam in Java which often shows the side of compromise and inconsistency toward *kejawen* values. The Javanese Islamic society is not only diligent in practicing Islamic values but also has an orientation towards *kejawen* culture, resulting in the practice of daily religion that is "role switches" and "half-measures" [7, p. 115]. In this context, the syncretism between the value of Islam and *Kejawen* meets and manifests in the form of daily Javanese religious and cultural practices. Through Beatty's view, we discover how two forms of culture can give each other space to co-exist. From the description above, the basic of ethical relativism for Javanese, did not only leads to acceptance of different religions as part of their society, but also in the appreciation of individuals who gave room to compromise a values opposite from their own truth – Beatty called it: "a temporary truce among radically different orientation" [7, p. 25].

Study of Islam Kejawen also has been done extensively by Mark Woodward. He explored an important subject of Javanese Islam: Piety Normative versus Mysticism.

Woodward refers two main issues in his study of Islam Kejawen: First, he proposed a hypothesis that Islam in Java is a derivative variant of Islam and not based on the values of Hindu-Buddhist which has been present in Java prior to the arrival of Islam. According to Woodward, Islam in Java is basically "Muslim", and does not stand as an evolution of Hindu-Buddhist tradition in Java as alleged by early anthropologists. In this regard, Islam Kejawen is a variant of Islam and not an aberration (Woodward, 1999). Second, he tries to find answers to the question of the previous scholar, Hodgson, who questioning why Islam can spread easily in Java. To this question, Woodward produced a new paradigm: that the spread of Islam in Java is translated into everyday life by the practice of Sufism and mysticism, something that the people of Java is familiarwith.

This mystical path of Sufism intersects with the values of pre-Islamic Java Society: Pantheism (a principle of becoming one with the Universe) [2, p. 103]. Islamic mysticism and the views of pantheism, shared the same concepts of becoming one with the Divine – even though they are different in their conception of divinity, but the mystical rites promoted in Sufism has given way for Islam to absorbed rapidly into the heart of Javanese culture, especially in Keraton (royal family) [2, p. 6]. Another new paradigm offers by Woodward is the fluidity of [the group of] Islam: he concluded that the opposition of values (mysticism and shariah) in Javanese culture, does not show in a fully conflictual manner– in everyday life, Santri and Abangan shared harmony andtolerance.

Another form of syncretism is shown explicitly in shadow puppet performance. The stories are core symbol of deconstruction in Javanese culture. The cosmic chaos presents because old values are no longer able to keep the universes in balance dampened by the emergence of a new value, namely Islam. Wayang, based on Hindu principles, faced ultimate deconstruction of values under the Islamic influence. One example of Islamic symbolism in wayang can be seen in several plays - such as Arjuna Wiwaha or Dewa Ruci - also in its major characterizations, for example, Yudhishtira who possessed a Kalimasada or Shahada sentences as a weapon. Yet, when speaking of the Islam Kejawen, no figure other than Semar can speak louder in term of ethical relativism. The figure of Semar embedded two relativisms at once: first, relativism that shakes social order and norms of harmony in Javanese society; Second, the inner relativism that attenuates the power of theKnights.

Semar is not a beauty in its figure - he is portrayed as a fat-breasted man like a woman with a big ass, even his steps and behavior is not indicate a person who has physical or mental power. Yet despite this unfathomable appearance, he contained the aspect of the highest spirituality of Javanese mysticism. Semar is, in fact, God Ismaya, the supreme God in Javanese myth, which manifests in the form of a people or a

servant. Semar's spiritual power surpassed any knight who became his master (juragan) - so in the form of Semar, the relativisms of the underlying social construction of Javanese society were realized: that although nobles and knights possessed qualified powers, they had no meaning when confronted with the real power of the people. Semar's symbol asserts that political power does not come from above, but from below. In addition to talking about social construction, the symbolic readings on Semar's relativism also appear in the form of satire toward the principle of harmony that is almost absolute in the Javanese society. This symbolization describes the process of syncretism itself. At first, the harmony was shaken by the presence of Semar - an unharmed and unfamiliar figure. But then the narrative of dissonance is slowly deconstructed the value of order in society, that lead to the acceptance other. This is how Semar plays as the key figure in Javanese tradition, as a symbol of relativism and bring along changes everytime he appears in the show. This particular form of spirituality and harmony that needs to be revived. By revisiting and re-interpreting the syncretism of Islam and Javanese culture, tolerance can be re-embraced in the current Indonesian multicultural context.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The study of Islam Kejawen presents a complexity of meanings and debates that occur between various perspectives. As elaborated earlier in this writing, different views on how the Javanese people position themselves in the narratives of Islam Kejawen is not yet cleared. Therefore, the study of Islam Kejawen always dynamic – transcend within the area of cultural, social and political life of Javanese community. In terms of cultural development, acceptance and tolerance are preserved in the daily life of temporary truce between Islam and Javanese tradition. But in social development, Islam nowaday face a major challenge from the new emergence groups that seem moves further away from ethical relativism and tolerance. This will bring violation to the “truce and tolerance” that has been preserved for centuries in the form of Islam Kejawen. With the danger of intolerance before us, the history of Islam Kejawen needs to be re-visit. Only with a deep understanding of history and our own culture, that we can embrace who we really are: a nation with an inherent principle of tolerance, open dialogues, and appreciation for differences.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] H.J. Van Den Berg, H. Kroeskamp, and I.P. Simandjoentak, *Dari Panggung Sejarah Dunia: Jilid I*. Jakarta-Groningen: J.B Wolters, 1952.
- [2] M. Woodward, *Islam Jawa*. Yogyakarta: LkiS, 1999.
- [3] R. Benedict, “A Defence of Ethical Relativism, Anthropology and the Abnormal. *Journal of General Psychology*. 10,” 1934.
- [4] P. Stange, *Kejawan Modern: Hakikat dalam Penghayatan Sumarah*. Yogyakarta: LkiS, 2007.
- [5] Koentjaraningrat, *Kebudayaan Jawa*. Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1994.
- [6] C. Geertz, *The Relogion of Java*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960.
- [7] A. Beatty, *Varieties of Javanese Religion: an Anthropological Account*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.