

## Chapter 9: Concluding Remarks

Throughout this work, I have presented a wide-ranging discussion of Javanese religious traditions as exhibited by people in Cirebon. Major parts of these traditions are readily observable because they are manifest in people's everyday life. The discussion stretches from what the people believe to what they do and how they act. Exceptions might occur but by and large, what the people believe, do and act, are complementary to each other. What they believe motivates what they do and how they act, while what they do and how they act reflects verbal expressions of what they believe. Careful examination of these traditions suggests that almost everything covered in this study can be located in an Islamic tradition, especially traced along the lines of traditional Islamic orthopraxy. As the discussion shows, almost everything has scriptural roots or finds its justification in the basic sources of Islamic doctrine: the Qur'an, the Hadith and the work of the *ulama* where operational meanings of the Qur'an and the Hadith are elaborated. Whether or not this basis and justification is considered applicable and acceptable to other Muslims, it is much more a matter of internal theological debate within the Muslim community than a subject for judgement by observers.

To make it clearer, it is worthwhile to review briefly what the preceding discussions have highlighted. This is useful especially to explore whether some part of the people's core traditions reveal, at any rate, contributions from non-Islamic elements, such as Hindu/Buddhist/Animist elements.

Discussion in Chapter Two, the initial substantive chapter, suggests that central to Cirebon-Javanese ideas is belief in the unity of God and His attributes which explains His self and existence. At the periphery there are other beings, physical and spiritual, malevolent and benevolent to human beings. All these beings are considered as His creation and, without exception, they are fully under His control. This is further substantiated when people refer to their deity. In this reference God is enunciated as the sole Creator, the Sovereign and the Ruler (Governor) of the whole universe and the contents thereof. A striking evidence throughout the discussion is a total absence of core Hindu deities and vocabularies (such as Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva or other names which would share in these crucial deity positions) that might suggest the probable intrusion of Hindu influence.

Another aspect which deserves careful consideration is the question about animism in relation to the belief in the existence of spirits and spiritual beings.<sup>1</sup> Animism, in Tylorian perspective and as Seymour-Smith (1990: 12–13) puts it, presupposes a consideration on the part of the believers that the 'spirit' or 'life' endowed in the natural phenomena should constitute an independent entity or

<sup>1</sup> This is specially crucial in Geertz's delineation of *abangan* spirit belief.

hold an independent power. This is in sharp contrast with the spirits and spiritual beings in which the Javanese hold a belief. To the Javanese, all beings, spiritual or physical, other than God are God's creation and are under His control. Moreover, to the people, the existence of spiritual beings is considered as a necessary consequence of the existence of physical beings. None of the beings are by themselves independent entities nor independent holders of particular powers. Even men, under certain circumstances of God's endowment, can control them or their power. This seems to imply that the people have at least a twofold conviction: one is that the position of these beings relative to the sovereign God is low, the other is the necessary absence of either the character of a deity or any legitimate right on the part of any of the spirits to be treated as a deity. In fact, the belief in the existence of spiritual beings is not the monopoly of a certain tradition such as animism, but it is a common feature of many other traditions, including Islam and Christianity. If reference to Islamic doctrine is required there is a verse in the early chapter of the Holy Qur'an (QS. 2:2– 3), for example, that says that the pious are those who believe, among other things, in unseen things (*ghayb*), which inevitably include spirits and spiritual beings. It is therefore ill founded to consider the Javanese, who believe in the existence of spiritual beings, as necessarily and automatically being specifically animist.

Chapter Three, which deals with mythology and cosmology, reveals quite explicitly the prevailing folk tales about the creation and origin of the universe and the creation and origin of mankind, including the Javanese. Major parts of these myths replicate people's cognitive knowledge and understanding about this matter. Unlike the core of (Islamic) doctrines which are religious constituents, the local people are quite aware of the position of myths which, as tales (*dongeng*), may or may not contain something true. Some parts of these myths, especially those which contain a cosmological outlook, might have been derived from the concept of *Martabat Pitu* (seven stages of creation), part of the theosophical speculation of Tarekat Syattariyah, an orthodox Sufi order, one of whose versions was held by the *kraton* circle. Other parts, especially those which are concerned with the origin of mankind, strongly enunciate the absolute unity and sovereignty of God, and degrading Hindu deities to ordinary non-powerful creatures, the ancestors. If Hindu/Sanskrit names and vocabularies are used in this respect, the tendency is much more for explanatory purposes rather than to teach or enunciate Hindu/Buddhist doctrine. On the part of the *kraton* potentates, parts of these myths, beside their religious purposes, might have been intentionally developed. It may serve as a useful means of educative, legitimating and ruling instruments, especially with regard to the notion of *rukun* (to live in harmony) on the one hand, and the pronouncement of the ancestral standing of the *kraton* potentates on the other.

The assertion of the absolute sovereignty of God again appears in the popular narratives of an eschatological nature. The narratives recount the unescapable

mortality of all creatures and the eventual fair judgement revealed to mankind, such as the reward of paradise and punishment of hell throughout eternal life after death. Total mortality, fair universal judgement, reward of paradise and punishment of hell are totally part of Islamic doctrine which stands in sharp contrast with, for example, Hindu/Buddhist's reincarnation, *karma* and *nirvana*, although some sort of ingenious speculative parallelism quite possibly could be drawn. It is similarly difficult to find here anything about the adoption of animistic concepts, considering nothing in animism gives a clear enunciation of a single sovereign deity, life after death, fair universal judgement, or the eventual reward of paradise and punishment of hell.

Turning our attention to the discussion of ritual practices, there is a clear indication that these ritual practices follow the lines of traditional Islamic orthopraxy. There is a set of ideologies on which many of these practices seem to rely. Three of which can be enumerated: (a) the broadly defined concept of "*ibadat*" (b) the crucial position of "*niyat*" and (c) the notion of "*ummat*".

In Cirebon, *ibadat* (devotion to God) is conceived of as having a broad as well as a narrow meaning. While its narrower meaning is clear enough, in that it refers to a set of activities relating to the enactment of the five pillars, the broader meaning of *ibadat* deserves special attention. In this broad sense of the term, *ibadat* is used to embrace a vast variety of activities. It refers to any activity, religious or otherwise, intended as a devotion to God. The traditionalist's understanding of this concept tends not to separate religious and worldly matters. It runs precisely parallel to Nasr's claim that everything is sacred and nothing is profane because everything bears the fragrance of the divine. The only thing which makes an activity religious or non-religious, or in Cirebonese terms "*ibadat*" or "*non (dudu)-ibadat*" is the presence or absence of *niyat* (intention). If there is a religious intention attached to an activity (as a form of devotion) this activity automatically becomes *ibadat*. In other words, *niyat* changes the status of an activity from non-*ibadat* into *ibadat*. In Durkheimian terms, a *niyat* brings the "profane" into the "sacred" because *niyat* ensures a flow of the divine fragrance. So important is the position of intention in this ideology that although it is sufficient to utter an intention by heart, a verbal utterance of the intention by tongue, such as by saying the *Bismillah* (in the name of God) or other forms of similar flavour, is credited to contain special merit.

Another point worth mentioning which characterises the traditional nature of Islam in Cirebon is that regarding the *ummat* (community of believers). The main issue concerns "who can be considered as a Muslim." In this context, Abu 'Ubayd, a classic traditionalist proponent, argues that one can be termed a believer on the basis of the statement of faith. Even a Muslim who commits a grave sin is still to be termed a believer and thus belongs to the community of

believers.<sup>2</sup> The application of this concept is clearly seen in Cirebon. People in this region and elsewhere consider anyone who uttered the *syahadat* to be automatically a Muslim. The person instantly belongs to the community of believers (*ummat*) and has an equal status as other Muslims do. When that person has trouble or gets sick, other Muslims are obliged to help, and when that person dies it is the duty of other Muslims to care for the corpse, to pray at the burial and to bury the person at a Muslim burial complex.<sup>3</sup> So strong is the sense of brotherhood, at least at the ideological level. The scope of this brotherhood is not confined to relatives or neighbours but extends to any Muslim, living anywhere, in the east and in the west, on earth or at sea. It transcends racial, spatial and temporal boundaries. It even includes those who live at the present time (still alive) and those who lived centuries ago in the past (already died). Special credits and honours are attributed to those who have devoted most parts of their lives solely to the path of God or, exhibited exemplary behaviour in terms of devotion and piety. Various commemorations, celebrations, festivals and feasts encapsulated in the *adat* rituals, including the *wali* and holy men veneration, mostly reflect the sanctification of this *ummat* and the ideas of brotherhood. The presence of people of various strata with various degrees of religiosity in these festivals, through which they express a sense of piety and Muslim identity, can therefore be interpreted as a symbolic representation of such sanctification. On these occasions, uttering prayers for the merits of all members of the *ummat*, whoever and wherever, dead or alive, is institutionalised. In a religious festival therefore, at least three elements intricately mix together: it is an *adat* because it is customarily performed, an *ibadat* because each participant uses it to express a sense of piety and Muslim identity, and a sanctification of notion of *ummat* whereby the internal social bond within the community of believers is strengthened.

It seems clear at this stage that Islam in Java is essentially no different from Islam elsewhere. Its foundation is threefold: *iman* (to have faith), *islam* (submission) and *ihsan* (deference), the same foundation adopted by all Muslims elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> During the Formative Period of Islam (9th–14th century AD) the questions about how *iman*, *islam* and *ihsan* should be understood and actualised became the subject of a profound and complex body of scholarly expositions. Various schools of thought have emerged in the field of theology with respect to *iman*, jurisprudence with respect to *islam* and theosophy and Sufism with respect to *ihsan*. One school was termed as the “traditionalists” because its followers often

<sup>2</sup> Rippin, A. (1990), *Muslims*, p.63. (The word between brackets is my own).

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter Two.

<sup>4</sup> Hadith transmitted by Muslim (see Chapter Two). Here I need to distinguish between (I)slam, a proper name referring to the religion of the Muslims and (I)slam to mean an act of submission.

called themselves as “*ahl al-sunnah*” meaning “followers of the Prophetic traditions.”<sup>5</sup>

Through a complex process of maturation this classical type of Islam, “Traditional Islam,” evolved and developed. It spread widely to various corners of the world following the spread of Islam itself. Eventually it reached Java at about the same time when Islam in general reached the archipelago.<sup>6</sup> In Java and elsewhere, this classical type of Islam, the full heritage of Sunni tradition, now better known as the “*Faham Ahlu Sunnah wal Jama'ah*,” contributed to Javanese popular traditions.<sup>7</sup> It presents itself as a religion with a harmonious and peaceful (*rukun-damai*) format. It came as a “grace for the whole universe” (*rahmatan lil-'alamin*) not as a condemnation. Through its genius, any time and anywhere it was ready to accommodate, absorb or be adopted by other traditions. It requires almost nothing but one condition. If there is an element in the absorbed tradition that opposes the principle of *tauhid* (unity of God) and submission to the one God, then such an element must be removed or replaced with an Islamic one. Once this condition is met, everything is acceptable. Coming in this format, “Traditional Islam” influenced the Javanese and shaped their traditions. Also in this format, its triumph in Java has been complete.

<sup>5</sup> In the early Formative Period, this group was generally connected to Ahmad ibn Hanbal (circa AD 855). See: Rippin, A. (1990), p.63.

<sup>6</sup> At this stage I do not think it so important to include an account on when Islam precisely came to Java and the archipelago, who brought it and how. I leave it to the hands of historians.

<sup>7</sup> Dhofier, Z. (1985) rightly states that this type of Islam (“*Faham Ahlu Sunnah wal Jama'ah*” or the “School for the followers of Prophetic traditions and Consensus”) is one which holds Asy'arite doctrine of theology, four *madzhab* (schools of thought: Syafi'ite, Malikite, Hanafite and Hanbilite) of jurisprudence, and Ghazalian Sufism. See also: Ali, H.A. (1980), *Ahlusunnah waljama'ah dan Unsur-unsur Pokok Ajarannya*, Semarang: Wicaksana. (H. Amin Ali, the writer of this book, is a Cirebonese Kyai).