

Foreword

This volume, *The Islamic Traditions of Cirebon* by A. G. Muhaimin provides an excellent introduction to the practice of Islam in contemporary Java. Dr Muhaimin takes great care in presenting Islamic belief and practice as a living social reality. In Cirebon, religious and customary practices – *ibadat* and *adat* – blend together in a single rich historical Islamic tradition. It is the whole of this tradition that Dr Muhaimin is concerned to elucidate.

The setting for this study is particularly important. The coastal town of Cirebon with the region in which it is situated was a historical gateway for the coming of Islam to Java. Cirebon is thus redolent with Islamic traditions and notable for its numerous historic Islamic institutions. It is, for example, the site of a mausoleum complex in which one of the earliest founders of Islam, Syarif Hidayatullah, more commonly known as Sunan Gunung Jati, is buried. Sunan Gunung Jati is regarded as one of the nine *Wali* or ‘Saints’ of Java and the presence of his tomb in Cirebon has given the town great spiritual status and made it a place of pious visitation and special veneration. At the same time, the town has retained its courtly traditions – two courts, the Kesepuhan and Kanoman *kraton* – that have, for centuries, fostered Islamic learning and a distinctive tradition of art and performance. Not only is the Cirebon area replete with Islamic shrines – more than 300 according to the Department of Education and Culture – it is also one of oldest and most important centres for Islamic education in Java. According to the Department of Religion, there are 274 *pesantren* – Islamic boarding schools – in the region of Cirebon. Some of these claim to date to the 17th, others to the 18th century. Many of these *pesantren* were begun in connection with Sufi orders. Hence to this day, Cirebon is remarkable for the variety of different *tarekat*, some of the oldest as well as some of the newest in Java.

Given the importance of both *tarekat* and *pesantren*, this study focuses on both institutions. Dr Muhaimin provides a detailed examination of one of Cirebon’s largest and most important *pesantren*, Buntet, that traces its foundations to *Kyai* Muqayim bin Abdul Hadi, the *Penghulu* of Kraton Kanoman, in the middle of the 18th century. The early history of *Pesantren* Buntet was intimately associated with the spread and development of *Tarekat* Syattariyah on Java and Buntet became a centre (*zawiyah*) for this order. Interestingly *Pesantren* Buntet is also a centre for *Tarekat* Tijaniyah which only became established on Java in the late 1920s. It is Tijaniyah that has become the most prominent *tarekat* in *Pesantren* Buntet.

The continuing promotion of Tijaniyah at Buntet, as described by Dr Muhaimin, reflects on the subtle and complex role of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Indonesia as an organization based on a dense network of *pesantren* and on the *ulama* or *kyai* associated with them. Dr Muhaimin examines the many genealogies, both

personal and spiritual, that link Buntet's *kyai* to other *pesantren* within the NU network. He also notes efforts by Buntet's *kyai* to gain official recognition from NU for Tijaniyah as a legitimate (*mu'tabarah*) *tarekat*. These efforts have been steadfastly rejected because this *tarekat*, founded by Ahmad at-Tijani in the 18th century lacks a spiritual genealogy (*silsilah*) of transmission like those of other Sufi orders. Despite this lack of official NU recognition, the *kyai* at Buntet continue to spread the teachings and practice of Tijaniyah. From Buntet, these practices of this *tarekat* have spread to other NU *pesantren* and have become particularly popular among the urban population of Java.

This book offers a rich mine of insights into the practice of Islam on Java. What is particularly valuable is the way that Dr Muhaimin consistently explicates a perspective on Islam associated with the mainstream of Nahdlatul Ulama – in effect, a Sufi notion of personal involvement in the world. From this perspective, there is no distinction between sacred and profane. By means of intention (*niyat*), religious practice (*ibadat*) goes beyond the required ritual duties and encompasses all activities. Quoting Nasr¹, he writes:

Thus... 'everything is essentially sacred and nothing is profane because everything bears within itself the fragrance of the Divine.' Therefore, *ibadat*, in this sense, may range from expressing daily courtesies to such things as the formal and solemn invocation both in and outside of formal prescribed prayers, and other forms of worship. It embraces a wide spectrum of actions and is akin to, and sometimes used inter-changeably with, *amal*, ('*aml*'), meaning work, another word which points to the same thing referred to by *ibadat*. Thus, the distinction between *amal* [one's work] and *ibadat* becomes elusive. Both *ibadat* and *amal* require *niyat* (intention) which becomes the stamp that the work is for God. Another way to ensure intention is by uttering or murmuring *Basmalah* (a phrase, saying 'In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful'). Thus doing any (good) thing, a religious or worldly matter, becomes *ibadat*, by merely preceding it with *Basmalah*.

In this view, all that is not forbidden (*haram*) can be made Islamic. For a traditionalist, 'islamizing' (*mengislamkan*) the world has more to do with consecrating the world than with transforming it. The exemplary methods cited for this process of 'islamizing' the world are those attributed to the earliest founders of Islam, the great *Wali* or Saints of Java, including Sunan Gunung Jati.

This is a study written with conviction and understanding. One of the ethnographic challenges that Cirebon poses to any observer is its depth of its local historical traditions and the multiple languages through which these

¹ S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought*. Boston: George Allen and Unwin.1981:7.

traditions are expressed. Javanese, Sundanese, Cirebonese which is a distinctive dialect of Javanese, Indonesian and Arabic are the working languages of Cirebon and are used daily, in different contexts, by members of the area's diverse communities. Dr Muhaimin comes from Cirebon; he is fluent in its languages; he is also a graduate of *Pesantren* Buntet. As a consequence, he is able to present his study as an ethnographer and insider. This is a work that deserves a close reading to appreciate its many insights.

An Indonesian translation of this work was published in 2001 under the title, *Islam Dalam Bingkai Budaya Lokal: Potret Dari Cirebon*² and continues to be available in Indonesia. A limited English edition of this work was also published in Jakarta in 2004 by the Centre for Research and Development of Socio-Religious Affairs, Office of Religious Research, Development and In-Service Training, of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The present publication of this volume within the ANU's *Islam in Southeast Asia* series provides the opportunity to make this work available to the wider international readership that it deserves.

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² Ciputat: Logos in cooperation with Yayasan Adikarya IKAPI and the Ford Foundation.