Cultural Encounter
ISLAM IN JAVA

A Javanese 'waygang-kulit', or shadow-play puppet.

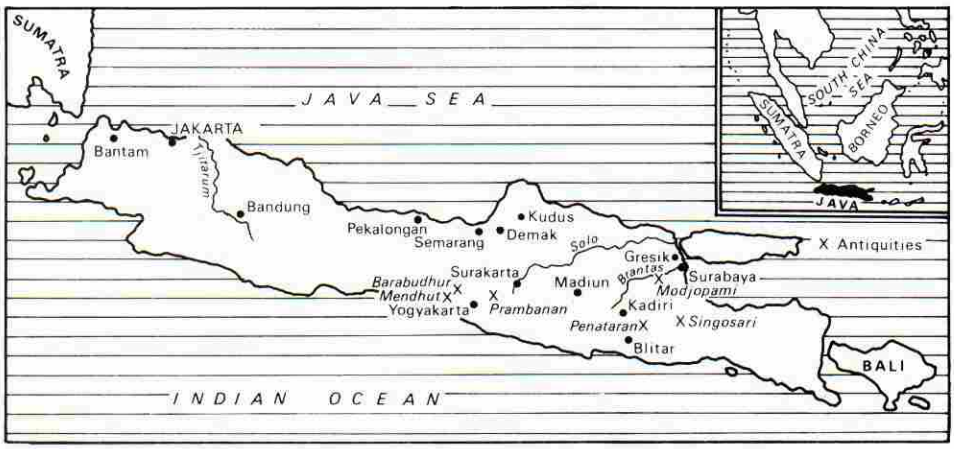
For the past six hundred years the island of Java has been the scene for the encounter of the two major cultural and religious traditions of the world.

M.C. Ricklefs

HISTORIANS SPEAK OF WATERSHEDS, turning points and paradigms while remaining sceptical that such things exist. When such distinctions between epochs or ways of doing things are identified they soon begin to be buried under qualifications, exceptions and continuities. Yet things do change and differ in human affairs; from time to time one says that, however messy it may be in detail, the gap between phenomenon A and phenomenon B is of significance and when they coincide in time and space a significant encounter has taken place. In cultural history this is often difficult to say, for cultures loan, borrow, adapt and develop with such complexity, often leaving so imperfect a record behind them, that boundaries, turning points and encounters are elusive to the historian's eyes. Yet even here, one must occasionally admit that an encounter has been identified. One of the most interesting and significant of these is found in the religious and cultural history of the island of Java, today a part of the Republic of Indonesia and home to over 90 million people. For the last six hundred years, this island has been the scene of a cultural encounter of world proportions.

The two cultural and religious traditions which encountered each other in Java represent the two main categories of world religions: those originating in the Middle East and those originating in South Asia. The differences between these two groups are profound, although they have not been without influence upon each other and efforts have been made to bridge the gaps between them. At the inevitable cost of some loss of analytical refinement, the differences between these two groups can be sketched as follows.

The Middle Eastern religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, have their origins in divine revelation. God reveals Himself through prophets or other messengers who produce scriptures for adherents to the faith. In Christianity God is believed to have incarnated as man in Christ, for Judaism and Islam a messiah is yet to come. They are all monotheistic: while other supernatural created beings are found (angels, spirits, etc.) there is only one God who is transcendent. To be sure, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity complicates this picture, but Christianity remains fundamentally a monotheistic religion. God transcends this temporal world, which is His creation. This world exists in all its multiformity because God called it thus into being.



Men must seek their salvation through adherence to God's laws through which they may win His grace. In Islam the *Qur'an* is regarded as the literal word of God, His final and complete revelation to men transmitted through His messenger Muhammad. There is thus little room for further speculation, but much for the elaboration of codes of law to implement the disciplines imposed by God upon men.

How different are the South Asian religions of Hinduism and Buddhism. The texts which are the foundation of Hinduism, the *Vedas*, are believed to have been revealed in antiquity to the sages but to have been committed to writing only after centuries of faithful oral transmission. Hinduism rests also upon mystical insight, reason and philosophical speculation about the nature of Reality and includes schools which, while generally accepting the origin of the *Vedas* in revelation, nonetheless deny Vedic authority, as does Buddhism. The holy men of Hinduism and Buddhism are enlightened rather than chosen, seers rather than divinely selected messengers. These religions are polytheistic, monistic and/or atheistic. Hinduism posits many gods but they are all aspects or manifestations of the ultimate Reality which is One. This is not monotheism but monism: there is not one God who stands transcendent above His creation (which is real), rather all that exists is one and the multiformity and plurality which men observe in the phenomenal world are a consequence of their ignorance of Reality. Reality is that which is permanent; the distinctions observed in the temporal world are unreal, a veil of ignorance which men must penetrate through insight and enlightenment. Reality is indwelling in men; it is the Reality which lies behind and within all being. Early Buddhism stressed that salvation can be achieved only by an individual's own efforts; there was no idea of divine grace. Men are trapped by their ignorance in a cycle of suffering and rebirth from which they can achieve liberation through ascetic disciplines *(yoga)*, study, introspection and insight leading to enlightenment and, in the case of Hinduism, through ritual.

Of course these simple paradigms conceal many important issues. Because these are all world religions they have adapted and developed in important ways in various temporal and geographical contexts, thereby blurring some of the distinctions sketched above. The mystical variants of the Middle Eastern religions in particular share much with the South Asian religions, which are mystical in essence. Indeed, as will be seen below, mysticism – the search for esoteric knowledge and direct experience of or absorption into the ultimate Reality, or God – has an ecumenical spirit which helps one to understand what happened when these two religious models encountered one another in Java. Nevertheless, fundamental differences remain between the two groups.

It is of considerable interest to the history of world religion to examine contexts in which these two types of belief encountered one another. South Asia is one such place, but there the analysis is complicated by the facts that Hinduism and Buddhism were indigenous while the Middle Eastern religion found there, Islam, came with foreign conquest. In Java, Hinduism and Buddhism were themselves foreign imports and when they were superseded by Islam the new faith was not imposed by foreign conquest but rather adopted by Javanese for domestic reasons. Thus, the contact between these two broad categories of world religions was a more purely social, cultural and philosophical encounter in Java than in India, where it also had military, political and racial aspects.

Pre-Islamic Java boasted sophisticated and literate societies. From early in the first millennium AD petty rulers in Java were adopting aspects of Hinduism, Mahayana Buddhism and the political paraphernalia of Indian kingship. Although the mechanisms by which this was done are obscure and hotly debated, one can say that this borrowing of Indian civilisation met local needs. By the eighth century AD Central Java had kingdoms which produced some of the finest Indian-style temple architecture and statuary to be found anywhere. The great temple at Barabudhur, for example, is one of the finest Buddhist monuments known while the nearby temple Mendhut has, in the view of many scholars, the most beautiful Buddha images in the world. Prambanan temple, east of the present-day city of Yogyakarta, is a Śiva temple whose soaring spire and bas-reliefs from the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* place it among the greatest examples of Hindu monumental architecture.

This was not a mere provincial copy of Indian civilisation; some things were adopted and some were not. Although the evidence is rather ambiguous, it seems that the caste system never developed in Java as it did in India, for example. The great scholar of Old Javanese language and literature, Professor P.J. Zoetmulder, SJ, has shown that Indian-style poetry written in the Old Javanese language reflected local settings and spoke to local tastes and needs. Local cults also carried on: down to the present one of the most important spiritual forces in the lives of many Central and East Javanese has remained the Goddess of the Southern Ocean, a being both beautiful and terrible, young and old, beneficent and demonic who is believed to live below the waters of the Indian Ocean south of Java. Although her cult may have had some association with goddesses in Hinduism and Buddhism (e.g. Durgā and Prajñāparamitā), she seems to be very much a local figure linked to lunar cycles, fertility cults, local spirit cults, and so on.

The pre-Islamic Indian-style religions of Java were notable for a syncretism or tolerance across categories which in India sometimes provoked conflict. Most importantly, Śivaism and Buddhism were united in Java. The fourteenth-century poem *Nāgarakĕrtāgama* began by praising the reigning king of Majapahit, the last (1292-1527) and greatest of the pre-Islamic states, as 'Śiva-Buddha, material-immaterial by nature'. This praise of the king as both Śiva and the

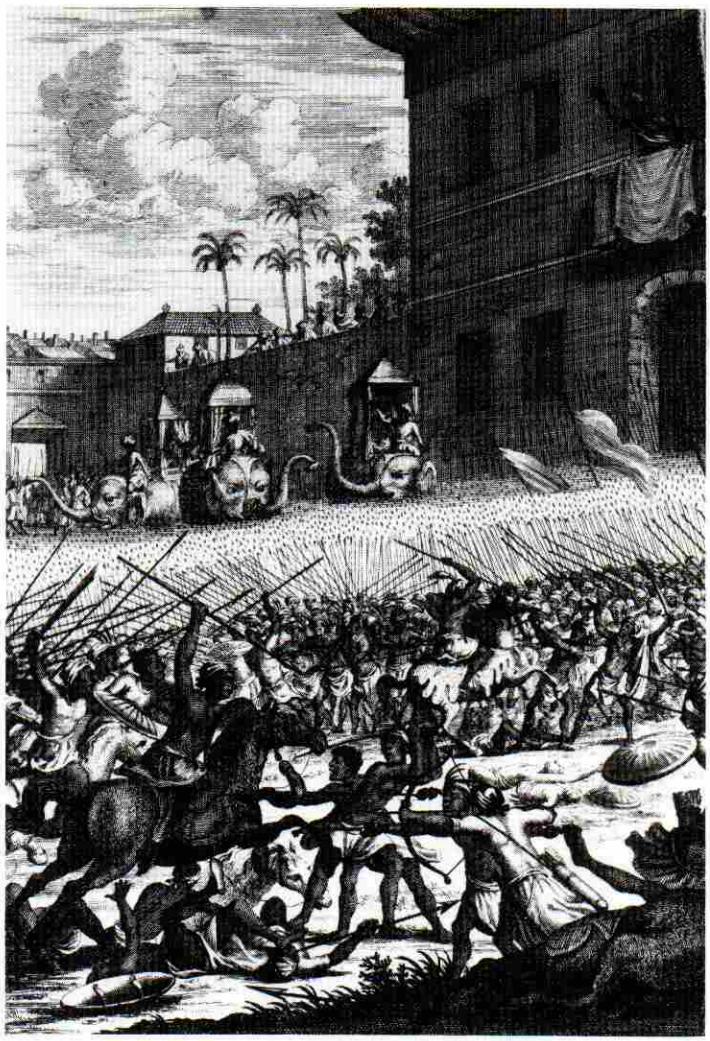
Buddha reflects a doctrine of non-duality which was fundamental to Old Javanese philosophy. In the text *Sutasoma* by the Majapahit poet Tantular, it was said that 'the essence of the Buddha and of Śiva is identical. Although distinct they are yet one . . .'. (The Old Javanese phrase for the second part of this statement, *bhinneka tunggal ika*, was, incidentally, adopted nearly six hundred years later as the national motto of the Republic of Indonesia, but was then interpreted as meaning 'unity in diversity' and referring to national unity within the ethnic diversity of the archipelago.) In a word, this was a Javanese civilisation with distinctive features which borrowed much from Indic civilisation but was no more a lesser India than the United States or Australia are lesser Britains. The Javanese had their own sense of proprieties and orthodoxies.

Into this rich and sophisticated culture came another refined religion, that of Islam. The religions of South Asia and of the Middle East thus met in Java. The early stages of Islamisation are very poorly documented but it is clear that they coincided with the flowering of Old Javanese Hindu-Buddhism in the age of Majapahit. Gravestones from the 1360s onwards are found near the site of the Majapahit court in East Java which mark the graves of Javanese notables, perhaps even members of the royal family, who were buried as Muslims. There was no sudden religious transition. While Islam presumably continued to spread throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Javanese *literati* continued to write new literary works inspired by South Asian religions until at least the late fifteenth century and, indeed, were still recopying Old Javanese Hindu-Buddhist works of literature into the eighteenth century. Had the Javanese, who managed to equate Śiva and the Buddha, added Allah to make a Javanese trinity? There is no evidence of this, but there is so little evidence between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries that historians are naturally tempted to speculate: what can be more enjoyable than a theory which has a fair prospect of avoiding any evidence?

The early sixteenth-century Portuguese traveller Tomé Pires left an astute description of Java which suggests how these two religious models got along with one another. Whereas Pires described conflict elsewhere, in Java he reported cultural assimilation. Foreigners (Indians, Chinese, and so on) who were already Muslims established new trading ports on the north coast of Java and then were Javanised while local Javanese were becoming Islamised. 'These Moorish *pates* [the Muslim rulers of the north coast] are great lords,' said Pires, yet 'when they speak of courtesy and civility they say that there is everything at court, and riches'. At this time (*circa* 1513), that court was still Hindu-Buddhist. One Javanese manuscript exists which describes hostility between Islam and the pre-existing religion in a transitional religious environment, but the date and provenance of this text are obscure and it may reflect circumstances from a remote region at a fairly late time rather than the early stages of Islamisation in the Javanese cultural heartland of Central and East Java.

The process of Islamisation is unclear. It is probable that traders and wandering Islamic mystics *(Sufis)* played a role and reasonably certain that foreign conquest followed by forcible imposition of Islam took place nowhere in Java except, perhaps, on a small scale at the odd trading settlement. While Islam does seem to have been brought by the sword to certain regions of Java, in such cases it was a matter of already-Islamised Javanese warriors conquering their neighbours and requiring conversion as a token of submission. So it seems that Javanese were adopting and assimilating what they found relevant, including the personnel of the new religion themselves. Pires said of the Islamic coastal lords, 'These lord *pates* are not Javanese of long standing, but they are descended from Chinese, from Parsees and Kling.' Javanisation and Islamisation were proceeding hand-in-hand. It seems also that Islam was generally being spread from higher social levels to those lower down and that it thus posed little threat to social hierarchy.

From the eighteenth century has survived an abundance of Javanese religious texts and other evidence which shows how Islam (by then the religion of almost every Javanese) and local traditions had moulded each other at least in the context of the Javanese courts, whence most of the evidence survives. Mystical Islam (Sufism) prevailed and in the realm of philosophy it was possible for many mystical doctrines of the Hindu and Buddhist type to be carried on. Monism was a common doctrine in eighteenth-century Javanese Islam,



Succession conflicts, as in Muslim Mataram, enabled the Dutch to extend their influence in the seventeenth-century.

(Left) The Castle of Batavia, circa 1656. Painting by A. Beckman.
(Below) A tiered roof mosque, a blend of Javanese and Islamic styles.

for texts frequently posited the unity of God and man. Although fine theological boundaries are difficult to draw in Islamic mysticism, there is little doubt that much of this Javanese philosophy constituted heresy in Islam.

Whatever the philosophical realm seems to have been like, however, Islam had fundamentally altered various social rituals. Burial replaced cremation of the dead and circumcision was apparently normal. The Indian solar calendar was also abandoned for official court purposes in favour of the Islamic lunar calendar in AD 1633: this was a remarkably late date for such a fundamental step and the Javanese calendrical system retained hybrid features not found in Arab lands. In other ways Islam was less successful: the drinking of alcohol by Javanese aristocrats is recorded in their court chronicles, for instance.

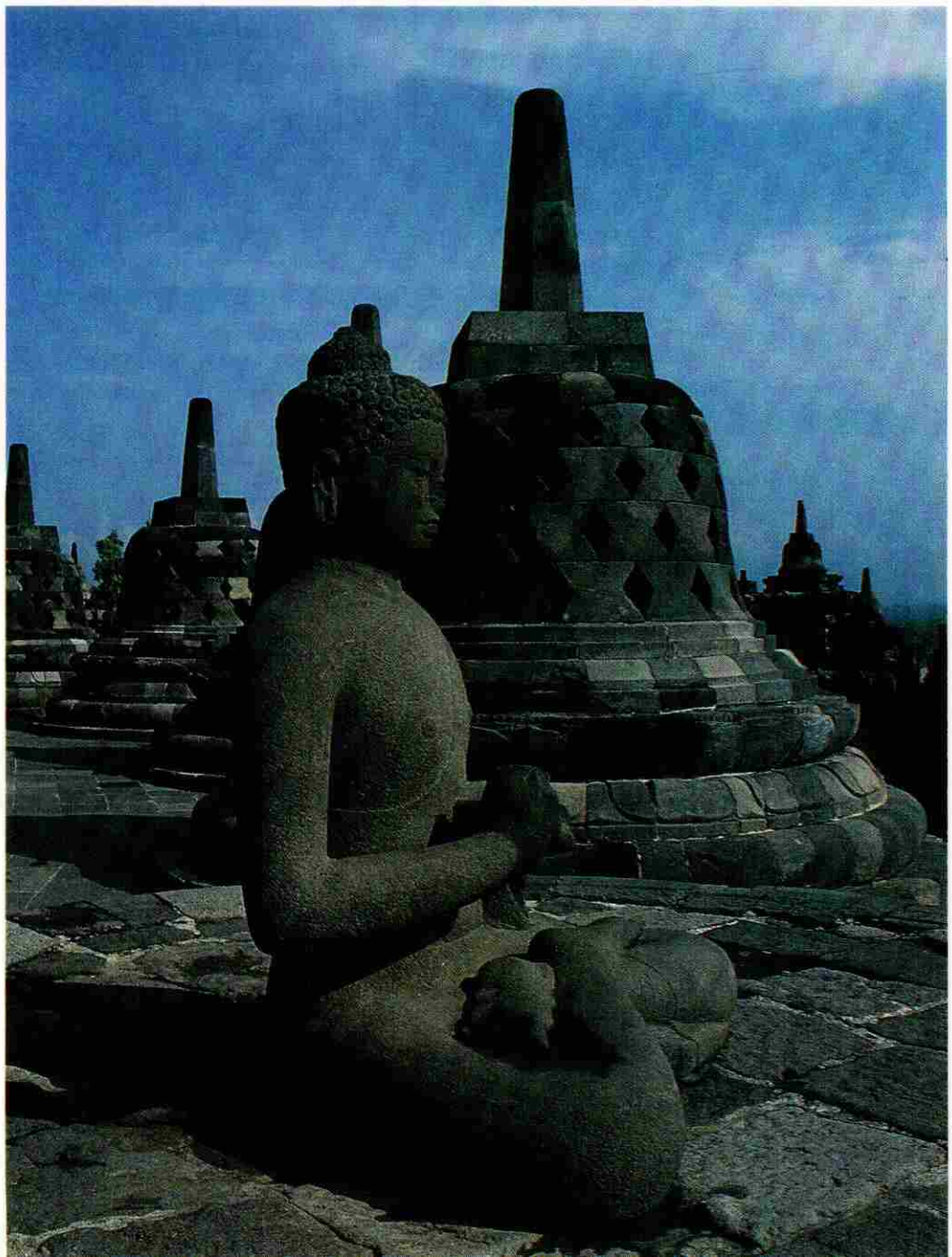
In other cultural affairs the continuing influence of pre-Islamic culture is clear. The shadow play *(wayang)* continued to use plots based on the Indian epics and puppets representing human images, albeit stylised ones, contrary to Islamic norms. The Javanese script (deriving ultimately from an ancient South Indian script) and local architectural traditions carried on as well. The town of Kudus, the only place in Java with an Arabic name (from *al-Quds,* Jerusalem), has one of the oldest (AD 1549) mosques in Java; its architecture, however, is more like that of an Old Javanese Hindu temple than the onion-domed mosques of the Middle East.

It seems, therefore, that Islam and the pre-existing Hindu-Buddhism had been assimilated into Javanese society in such a way as to produce a new accommodation. Put simply, Islam had altered important social rituals and enriched religious life by providing a new range of religious texts and phrases. In the arts and literature Islamic norms had been obliged to adapt to older Javanese cultural forms. And in the realm of philosophy – where are found the issues which constitute the world religious watershed of primary concern here – Islam had fitted in with the dominant South Asian-style mystical concepts; it had been able to do so because it was Islam's mystical variant which was most represented in Java. In brief, the cultural encounter in Java had led to accommodation rather than conflict. But rougher waters lay ahead.

Both the international and local contexts changed dramatically in the course of the nineteenth century. First in the Middle East and then in other Islamic lands, Islamic reformist and revival movements began. In part these were a response to the rising tide of European imperialism which was engulfing many Islamic peoples, among them the Javanese. Although Europeans had been present in Java since the early sixteenth century and had acquired some directly ruled enclaves on the island before the nineteenth century, it was only after the Java War of 1825-30 that Dutch rule was imposed effectively and consistently throughout the Javanese heartland, thereby precipitating a cultural crisis which coincided with international Islam's search for renewal. Out of this came a religious division on Javanese soil.

A very major and violent Islamic reform movement began in West Sumatra in the 1780s and ended in Dutch conquest of the area by the late 1830s, but no comparable reform episode took place in nineteenth-century Java. Nevertheless, it seems that devout Javanese Muslims were in touch with such events elsewhere through participation in the pilgrim-

The Temple of Barabudhur, circa AD850. (Above) A frieze of musicians and women. (Below) Buddha and Shipas on the top level.

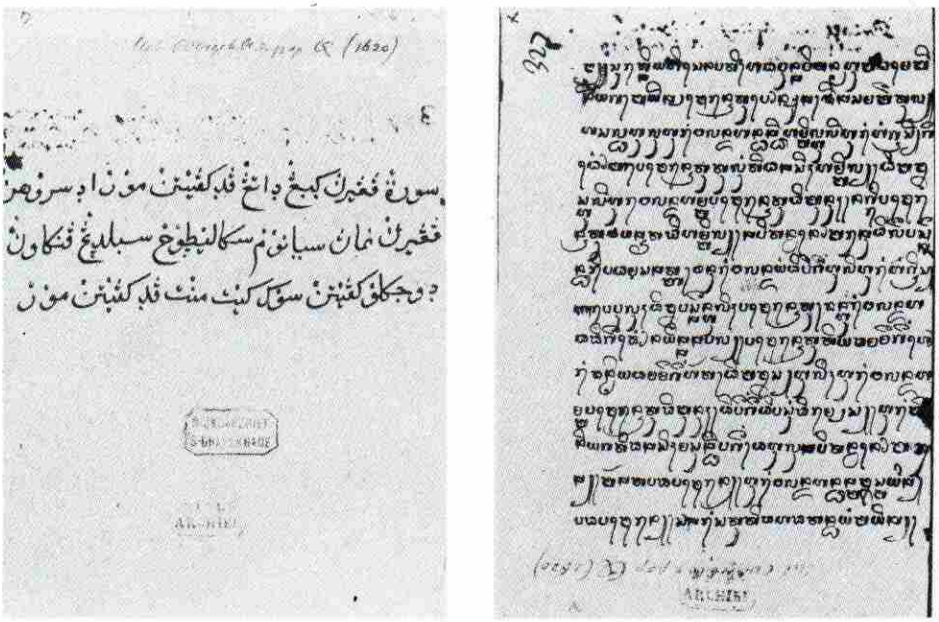


age to Mecca and other avenues of communication within the Islamic world, and probably began working towards more orthodox Islamic faith and practice in Java. In reaction to this, by the later years of the century some Javanese who were committed to the mystical South Asian-style beliefs (which for centuries had been regarded in Java as being also Islamic) began to turn against Islam. This was presumably because they began to realise that for the first time in Javanese history they could only continue to call themselves Muslims at the price of changing their beliefs and much of their social and cultural life.

Javanese literary works denouncing Islam, slandering its Prophet and bemoaning its coming to Java now began to appear. Two of these, entitled *Serat Dermagandhul* and *Suluk Gatholoco,* did this so vigorously that published editions of them were confiscated by the Dutch colonial government in 1925 and again by the independent Indonesian government in 1961 to avoid stirring up trouble, both times with only limited success.

Colonial rule led thinking Javanese to feel that some fundamental ailment in Javanese society left it weak in the face of Dutch power, but adherents of the two extreme religious paradigms available in Java (which one may call the Islamic Modernist and the Javanist) identified this ailment in diametrically opposed ways. At least by the opening years of the twentieth century so-called Modernist Islamic reformers believed, as did their fellows in the Middle East, that the original purity of God's message through His Prophet Muhammad had been obscured by centuries of theological obscurantism, acceptance of local accretions to the faith and ignorance. The key to restoration was thus to return to the simplicity and purity of early Islam. These Islamic Modernist ideas had an anti-mystical bias and were opposed to those local traditions which were central to Javanese culture. Their Javanist opponents believed that the weakness of Javanese civilisation was caused by the very coming of Islam. Their solution was thus to return to pre-Islamic Javanese civilisation, which at least some of them believed could be done by also embracing the scientific learning of the West and thereby, as it were, outflanking Islam from both sides with a new synthesis. Among this group Theosophy spread: for Westerners this was the rediscovery of ancient Eastern wisdoms, for

Javanese pilgrims on their return from Mecca, circa 1905. Islamic Modernist ideas stressed the need to observe the purity of early Islam.



Two examples of Javanese paleography, both written in 1619: left, Malay in Arabic script, and right in Javanese script.

Indians (among whom also Theosophy thrived) it was a means of being modern and traditional at once, for Javanese it was a doctrine combining modernity with tradition and, significantly, rejecting the authority of Islam, for the Eastern ideas which attracted Blavatsky and the other founders of Theosophy were primarily those of the South Asian religions. Between the proponents of the Islamic Modernist and Javanist solutions was a cultural middle ground occupied by the rural religious teachers with their Orthodox (*Shafi'i* School of Law) Islam and mysticism. They had links (however tenuous at times) to both Islamic Modernists and Javanists and to some extent may have moderated the cultural confrontation between them.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century the cultural boundaries hardened in Java. Modernist Islam became institutionalised in several organisations, the most important being *Muhammadiyah*, which was founded in Yogyakarta in 1912 and became a major force in education and social welfare activities as well as in religious life. Those who rejected reformist Islam founded (also in Yogyakarta) the *Taman Siswa* school system in 1922: this combined modern Western education with Javanese culture of the pre-Islamic style.

The anti-colonial political movements which arose in this period also reflected the hardening cultural categories and thus reinforced them. Modernist Muslims became important in *Sarekat Islam* (Islamic Union) while anti-Islamic sentiments motivated some leaders and members of the Indonesian Communist Party (which was outlawed after a rebellion attempt in 1926-7) and were important in the barely political but certainly Javanist organisation *Budi Utomo* (Beautiful Endeavour), which was founded in 1908 by educated Javanese many of whom had been influenced by Theosophy. Virulent anti-Islamic views inspired an article in a Javanese-language newspaper in January 1918 which pictured the Prophet as a drunkard and opium smoker. Devout Muslims responded by creating an organisation called the Army of the Prophet Muhammad which in turn inspired their opponents to establish a Committee for Javanese Nationalism. Yet there were also cultural bridges; the Communist Party, for example, promoted a brand of 'Islamic Communism' in West Java and the Surakarta area before 1926. In general, however, this was a time of deepening divisions.

The story of the hardening cultural, religious, social and political categories in Java during the present century is a long and complex one. Here two points only can be emphasised. Firstly, this hardening was the fruit of declining ignorance and indifference. As devout Muslims gained a more profound understanding of their faith and accepted the call to mission which is strong in Islam, they could no longer accept the amiable religious tolerance of the past. Much of what they saw around them – lax observation of ritual obligations, heretical theology, adherence to pre-Islamic cultural norms by their fellow Muslims – was simply intolerable. They thus began to press for reform and thereby made actual the conflict between religious models which had been latent for so long. Secondly, this effort for reform led to violence.

At the beginning the violence was small scale. Early in this century, the first Modernist Muslim families were sometimes driven from their home villages, for example. By the time of the Indonesian Revolution (1945-49) it was possible to identify and label communities according to their Javanist or Islamic commitment and social tensions and violence began to follow such communal lines. The *abangan* (literally the 'brown' or 'red' people) called themselves Muslims but rejected strict Islamic standards of belief and practice and adhered to Javanese cultural and social norms. The *putihan* (white people), *Muslimin*

In 1965 political violence erupted between the muslim purists and 'abangan' Javanese.

(Muslims) or *santri* (students of religion) adhered more devoutly to Islam, but this group could be divided into Orthodox (followers of the *Shafi'i* School of Law) and Modernists. These *santri* were a minority, just as devout religious people tend to be minorities in all societies, but they were (and are) a vigorous and highly motivated minority. In 1948 the first significant violence along such lines occurred at Madiun in East Java when *abangan* followers of the Communist Party (resurrected at the outbreak of the Revolution) slaughtered *santris*.

After independence at the end of 1949, Javanese political life became entwined with that of the larger Republic of Indonesia so that new complexities arose. In brief, however, it can be said that down to 1965 communal *santri-abangan* tensions and the lines of political competition coincided with and reinforced each other in Java, and also came to have social class ramifications in some contexts. All of this culminated in 1965-6. In late 1965 an abortive coup attempt in Jakarta triggered unprecedented violence in the countryside of Java, much of which followed *santri-abangan* lines as *abangan* followers of the Communist Party were singled out for attack. Unknown numbers died in the following months, probably at least 500,000. The story of Islam in Java thus proceeded from cultural encounter and accommodation to social, political and sectarian bloodshed.

Since 1965 the 'New Order' government of Indonesia, essentially a pro-Western military-dominated bureaucratic regime with developmental aspirations, has attempted to depoliticise religious issues in general while keeping devout Muslims removed from political power. Pious Muslims thus face political frustration which coincides with an even profounder religious frustration, for among *abangan* Javanese increasing numbers have ceased to be even nominally Muslim. Hinduism, Buddhism, local mystical sects called Kebatinan (literally 'inwardness') and even another Middle Eastern religion, Christianity, have grown rapidly in the last quarter century. In the 1980 census nearly 97 per cent of the total population of Central and East Java and the Special District of Yogyakarta still regarded themselves as Muslims (only a small percentage of these would be *santris*, of course), but in the major cities of these provinces there were between 10 and 18 per cent Christians. A comparison with the 1971 census shows that this is a continuing trend. Such growth of other faiths is unprecedented in the Islamic world and can be seen as a continuation of the complex religious history of Java over the last century, for the growing minority of Javanese who reject Islam do so particularly because of its increasing zealotry and its involvement in the killings of 1965-6.

It need hardly be said that this article has ignored many nuances and details. The broad picture, however, can be put as follows. Religious accommodation was possible for several centuries in Java because Islam tolerated or even adopted (or, perhaps one should say, was assimilated into) pre-existing philosophical precepts and cultural norms while Islamising some aspects of ritual. Since the late nineteenth century, however, greater orthodoxy of belief and practice has been demanded by Islamic reformers and religious accommodation has become increasingly difficult. Islam, like Christianity, has a strong missionary impulse: it is impossible for a committed believer to be indifferent to the implementation of God's word. Thus compromise is only possible on Islam's terms, which a significant number of Javanese are unwilling to accept. While many Javanese are more deeply committed to Islam now than in the past, an increasing minority are turning to other religions.

The encounter between religions is thus a continuing phenomenon in Java. It is no arid theoretical issue, but is rather the key to much of Java's social and cultural history and history of ideas and makes Java an important locus for the study of comparative religion and cultural contact. It is also an encounter because of which people have suffered and died and may do so again. The conclusions one draws from such a story about cultural coexistence are not entirely optimistic ones.

FOR FURTHER READING:

M.C. Ricklefs, *A history of modern Indonesia* (Macmillan, 1981); P.J. Zoetmulder, *Kalangwan: A survey of Old Javanese literature* (Nijhoff, The Hague, 1974); Harun Hadiwijono, *Man in the present Javanese mysticism* (Bosch & Keuning, Baarn, 1967); B.J. Boland, *The struggle of Islam in modern Indonesia* (Nijhoff, The Hague, 1971); Deliar Noer, *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia, 1900-1942* (Oxford University Press, Singapore, etc., 1973).