

Response to Javanese Tradition in Kiai Shaleh Darat's Writings

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Abstract

The process of Islamization of Java is totally obscure. Because of the dark history of their conversion into Islam, and of misleading information from some orientalists, some members of Muslim communities mistaken some rituals as animistic and un-Islamic. On the other extreme, ironically, they confuse creed that is in opposition to Islam with the Islamic orthodoxy. For the former, slametan is the perfect example, meanwhile, for the latter, sadjen becomes its representative. This paper aims to describe and analyze Kiai Saleh Darat's response to both slametan and sadjen, some abangan customs (adat) – as Geertz would like to call – written down in Saleh's works. Based on this analysis, we also would provide a response to the error Geertz makes about the animistic attribute of slametan. In contrast to his imagination, slametan is perfectly Islamic and based on Islamic practice of communities from which Javanese Islam originate. In addition, Kiai Shaleh accepts the ritual and gives it Islamic justification. Meanwhile, sadjen – as Kiai Shaleh points out – is totally an opposition to the most fundamental credo of Islam, namely the Unity of God, "Tauhid."

Keywords: islamization of Java; abangan; slametan; sadjen

A. Introduction

When Islam as "the unconditional surrender to the will of God"¹ was preached to the Arabic people of the 7th century, it faced for the first time, system of customs to which three different responses were given. First, Islam totally banned some of them. Second, it confirmed some of them with more or less alteration so they were in accord with the fundamental teaching of Islam. Finally, it confirmed and strengthened some of them without any alteration. Every response has its own

¹Vincent J. H. Houben. "Southeast Asia and Islam." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 588 (2003): 149-70. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1049859>.

underlying reasons to determine which practice should be totally rejected and which should be assimilated. In the history of Islamization,² these responses and their underlying reasons become the golden rule for Islam when it enters every new civilization. Based on these foundations, Kiai Shaleh Darat³ responses to the local beliefs of Javanese people. The result, he determined that some of the rituals, which are exclusively attributed to *abangan* by Geertz⁴ and therefore are not Islamic, are perfectly acceptable to Islam.

B. The Prophet and Pre-Islamic Creed and Rituals

When Quraiş tribes were desperate to stop Muhammad from his teaching, they tried to negotiate with the prophet to mix the two systems of beliefs, namely paganism and Islam. The prophet and his Muslim followers, the idol worshippers offer, should practice pagan tradition in a year, they in exchange would prostrate before God of Islam in the other year. The Prophet, as God commands him in Quran chapter The Disbelievers (109), strongly denounces this offer.⁵ Instead He purifies Islam the governing doctrine of Islam, namely the Unity of God. This response becomes an orthodoxy form in Islam for any encounter with every system of creed. In other words, Islam purifies God from partner that the pre-Islamic Arabian community commonly had in their mind in those eras. Even though that, the word for God in the community is not abrogated but it is purified. For that reason, the early revelation of the Quran (Mecca revelation) always address “God” *Allāh* as “the Lord” *rabb*. Only then after the non-believer asked about what actually Muḥammad – peace be upon him – meant by “Lord”, *Allāh* was introduced with purifying the name from any partner ascription.

²Mark R. Woodward and Association for Asian Studies., *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta, The Association for Asian Studies Monograph; No. 45; Monographs of the Association for Asian Studies*, 45. (Tucson, Ariz.: The University of Arizona Press, 1989), 53.

³He, Muḥammad Shaleh bin ‘Umar Darat as-Samarani, is one of Indonesian greatest Islamic scholars in the 19th century. Born in Jepara, he travelled across the Java, Madura, and finally to Mecca in order to gain Islamic knowledge from Muslim scholars in his era. He writes all of his treatises in Java language but in Arabic transcript, known as *pegon*. In Semarang he trained many students who later become notable Muslim scholars including the first and the only Grand Imam of Nahḍatul ‘Ulama, Hashim Asy’ari, and the founder of Muhammadiyah, Ahmad Dahlan. Nur Ahmad, “Kualitas Hadis-Hadis dalam Kitab Syarah al-Hikam Karya Kiai Shaleh Darat” (undergraduate, UIN Walisongo, 2014), 55–74, <http://eprints.walisongo.ac.id/3932/>.

⁴In chapter one to nine of his *The Religion of Java*, Geertz lists several rituals and beliefs of Javanese people which he attributed to *abangan* people. This attribution as we would like to prove in this paper is not valid. Clifford. Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, Phoenix ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

⁵Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Aḥmad Wāḥidī, *Reasons and Occasions of Revelation of the Holy Quran = Asbāb Nuzūl al-Qur’ān* (Beyrouth, Liban: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyah, 1991), 496.

In the realm of rites, the more flexible and fluid response Islam gave to the first community it faced. The pilgrimage to the Ka'ba which has already existed for long time before is kept and purified from unethical practices such as circumambulating Ka'ba with stark naked. Islam also strengthen the notion of ethical concepts held by Arabian people. They, for example, greatly respect older people. They also value person as very honorable when they connect brotherhood between people.

Based on these concepts Muslim scholars promote the notion of fluid integration between local tradition or custom and Islam. The fact that how diverse cultures into which Islam enters and builds one Islamic civilization, since we cannot have a civilization without a religion, shows what we mean here. Indonesia, Persian, Moroccan cultures are difference from each other, but there are all bounded in one Islamic civilization.

In Indonesia, the context we would address in this paper, a unique "integration" between local customs and Islam happens in some degree. Even though Geertz believes that the rituals practiced by Javanese people are originated from the Javanese religious system,⁶ Hefner points out to the overlooking of the Islamic influence in the tradition by his and others Dutch Orientalists.⁷ For the later, there is a growing influence of Islamic teaching in the local customs.⁸

C. Customs of Javanese people and Kiai Shaleh's response

1. *Slametan*: Its Islamic Root

Geertz exaggerates when he characterizes *slametas* as the communal feast wherein "Friends, neighbors, fellow workers, relatives, local spirits, dead ancestors, and near-forgotten gods all get bound..."⁹ He explicitly describes it as a core animistic rite performed by Javanese people. In contrast, in a brilliant way, a contemporary Indonesianist, Mark Woodward, provides a more appropriate interpretation of *slametan*. He disputes Geertz's presumption of animistic and therefore not Islamic rite of *slametan* and characterizes it as "a ritual meal at which Arabic prayers are recited and food is offered to the Prophet Muhammad, saints, and ancestors, who are implored to shower

⁶Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 1.

⁷Robert W. Hefner, "Islam in an Era of Nation-states: Politics and Religious Renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia", in Robert W. Hefner & Patricia Horvatic (eds.), *Islam in an Era of Nationstates: Politics and Religious Renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 11.

⁸Hefner., 12.

⁹Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 11.

blessings on the community.”¹⁰This meal feast is an expression of Islamic Tradition in Javanese society. For Javanese Muslims, the idea of performing the rite is that they could derive blessing, *barākah*, when they show their gratitude, *syukur*, such as when someone is getting a baby, having a new house, marrying someone, or in every occasions they consider as “favor.”

This tradition is based on many hadith in which the prophet has been reported to give blessing to small part of meal by his prayer so it could be eaten by many of his companions. One hadith reports,

"On the day of the battle of Tabūk, the people became hungry and said: 'O Messenger of Allah, why don't you give us permission to slaughter our camels, and we will eat them and make use of their fat.' The Messenger of Allah said: 'Do that.' Then 'Umar came and said: 'O Messenger of Allah, if you do that we will have few mounts. Rather call them to bring whatever provisions they have left, then pray to Allah over them, asking Him to bless them for them, and perhaps Allah will bless them.' The Messenger of Allah said: 'Yes.' He called for a leather mat and spread it out, then he called for their leftover provisions. One man brought a handful of corn, another brought a handful of dates, and another brought a piece of bread, until a little food had been collected on the leather mat. Then the Messenger of Allah, O, prayed for blessing for it, then he said: 'Put it in your vessels.' They filled their vessels until there was no vessel left in the camp that was not filled. They ate until they were full, and there was plenty left over. Then the Messenger of Allah said: 'I bear witness that none has the right to be worshipped but Allah and that I am the Messenger of Allah. No one who meets Allah (believing) in them and not doubting them will be kept away from Paradise.'"¹¹

Beside this hadith, there are so many hadiths reporting the blessing the Prophet had on meals. In most of them, the situations were always that the companions were lack of meals or near to starvation. The Prophet prays on the meals for the companions and they eat together after that. This practice of the prophet becomes the theological basis for Muslims in many cultures to have communal feast wherein people eat together.

In Java, a unique form of this practice has existed since the first wave of Islamization. Javanese people perform a communal meal-feast for specific reasons such as birth, wedding, and death; with specific food offerings such as *apem*, rice-flour pancakes, and specific recitation of the Quran. Since the people of Java has become to understand religion more rigid, this tradition encounters a challenge from so call “pure

¹⁰Mark R. Woodward, *Java, Indonesia and Islam*, Muslims in Global Societies Series; v. 3; Muslims in Global Societies Series; v. 3. (Dordrecht; Springer, 2011), 113.

¹¹Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī et al., *English Translation of Sahīh Muslim*, ed. Abū Ṭāhir Zubayr ‘Alī Za’ī, vol. 1, (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2007), 124–25.

Islamic teaching.”In his writings, Kiai Shaleh discusses the tradition practiced by Javanese people in his era; he pays a great attention to the common people who questions a theological status of these practices so those who are practicing it become at peace because their tradition is in accordance with Islam.

In regard to *slametan* for death people, Kiai Shaleh answers that *slametan* for death people is kind of charity (*ṣadaqah*). Before the people eat the food, they recite the holy Quran and pray for the newly death and their death ancestors in order to copy the practice of the Prophet. Therefore, according to Kiai Shaleh Darat, this aims giving is encouraged by Islam.¹²He basis this fatwa on hadith which reports that a main said,

"It was narrated from 'Aishah that a man came to the Prophet and said: " Messenger of Allah, my mother died suddenly and did not leave a will. I think that if she had been able to speak, she would have given charity. Will she have any reward if I give charity on her behalf?" He said: "Yes."¹³

However, he also makes a correction of the practice. His legal opinions limit the practice with three conditions. First, the almsgiving is prohibited when the person who died owe debts to God and/or to man such as alms (*zakāt*).¹⁴Second, it is also prohibited when the person who died leaves children who are not mature (*bālig*), before the children receive their inheritance.¹⁵ Third, the almsgiving is not limited to the third, the seventh, or the thousand days after the person died as Javanese usually do.¹⁶

These first two constraints deliver the people of Java to creatively compromise the tradition with the criteria of Islam. Therefore, instead of funding the feast using the inheritance of the death, neighborhoods voluntarily raise funds when they come to show their empathy to the newly bereaved family. From this sum of money, the family finance the ceremony without breaking the law of Islam (*shari'a*).

The other mode of collecting money is by the neighborhood-based system namely *uang kematian*, money for the death. The basic community association, *Rukun Tetangga* (RT), which usually comprises of 15-30 households are asked to give some money arranged by the secretary of the RT. In many towns the amount money derived from one household is 5,000 to 10,000 rupiahs. Some rich people would give more than the agreed amount. This innovative scheme also applies to the next higher administrative level,

¹²Saleh b. 'Umar Darat. Samarani, *Majmū'at Al-Sharī'ah Al-Kāfiyah Lil-'Awwām* (Cirebon: Maktabah al-Miṣriyyah, n.d.), 88–89.

¹³al-Qushayrī et al., *Sahīh Muslim*, 3:50–51.

¹⁴Samarani, *Majmū'at al-Sharī'ah al-Kāfiyah Lil-'Awwām*, 88.

¹⁵ Samarani, 89.

¹⁶ Samarani.

Rukun Warga usually comprises of several *Rukun Tetangga*. In some cases, if the death person has children are still in elementary school, junior high school or even senior high school, their friends set up fund to help their friend. Thus, in many cases the sum of money could meet the need of funeral process, such as to hire gravedigger, held *slametan* with good food *et cetera*.

Contrary to what Kiai Shaleh teaches,¹⁷ the third has become the living practice within Javanese Muslims. Most Javanese people always pray for the death starting from the first day to the seventh, then the fortieth, hundredth, and one thousandth after the death. Javanese people, even though they are poor, would strive to organize the ceremony for their death ancestors which rise to theological problem we would discuss soon. While for the nominal Muslims, the cycle ends with the one thousandth (Javanese, *nyewu*), for *santri* community the cycle would continue to the annual commemoration. When the death person is believed by many people as great *Kiai*, sometimes referred as “*wāli*”, the ceremony would be attended by tens of to hundreds of thousands of people. For example, Kiai Shaleh’s death commemoration himself, being revered by many Muslims, common people and elite, as great Kiai of Java, is attended by thousand peoples every *Syawwāl* 10.

Muslim fundamentalists, usually those who held Wahabism or are related to it, and some orientalist blindly judge the ritual as Buddhist-Hindu origin or at least ignore its Islamic bases.¹⁸ Our prime example is the series of book written by an 8-year student of a university at the Kingdom of Saudi Arabian.¹⁹ Mahrus Ali, who decisively claim as ex-NU scholar, writes series of controversial books condemning the rituals practiced by Muslims nominals in Indonesia, including *Tahlilan* a contemporary term of *slametan* for deaths.²⁰ In order to clarify his claim and belief, a representative of NU came to his house in 2010, when the books sparked off public debate.²¹ The result proves his false claim. He was not an NU scholar, nor he shows a complete understanding of the matters he addresses in his books.

¹⁷ Samarani, 89.

¹⁸ Mary Chamberlain, *Caribbean Migration: Globalized Identities* (Routledge, 2002), 116.

¹⁹ “Membongkar Kebohongan H Mahrus Ali dan Rekyasa Busuk Wahabi - Kompasiana.com,” *Kompasiana*, accessed November 13, 2016,

http://www.kompasiana.com/luqmanfirmansyah/membongkar-kebohongan-h-mahrus-ali-dan-rekyasa-busuk-wahabi_550054d3a333111e73510971.

²⁰ His books are H. Mahrus Ali, *Mantan kiai NU menggugat tahlilan, istighosahan dan ziarah para wali* (Solo: Laa Tasyuki Press, 2007) and *Mantan Kiai NU meluruskan ritual-ritual kiai ahli bid’ah yang dianggap sunnah: nisfu sya’ban, rebo wekasan, tingkepan & bid’ah-bid’ah dari Muharram-Dzulhijjah* (Laa Tasyuki Press, 2008).

²¹ Such as what has done by Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 72.

In contrast to the misleading ideas, *slametan* actually originates from the huge body of Islamic civilization. There are two valid arguments justify our point of view. First, from historical observation, Woodward convincingly points towards the Islamic root of *slametan*.²² He traces the origin of *slametan* to the practice of *nercha* by Muslim communities in Kerala, South India.²³ His major argument is the striking resemblance of the type of food offered in both events, namely *apem*, rice-flour pancakes. In addition, two communities also hold very firm belief that saints, to which *slametan* is dedicated, would pour blessings over the food. This is not to point another same core rituals and school of Islamic jurisprudence, namely *Shafi'ite*, held by two communities

Second, from linguistic point of view, Woodward highlights that the word *kendhuri*, which is the other popular name of *slametan*, is derived from the Persian term *kundur*, tablecloth.²⁴ This term is employed by *Shafiite* jurisprudence books for “feasts held in honor of the Prophet Muhammad, saints, and souls of the dead.”²⁵ For Javanese people, nowadays the central idea of *kendhuri* is thanksgiving for any favor they received from God. The Quran says, “And as for the blessing of thy Lord, proclaim!”. This proclamation of the blessing embedded in any favorable things someone receives is the basis of confirming *kendhuri* from the Islamic point of view.

2. *Sadjen*: the remainder of the old Javanese religion

Another Javanese ritual that Kiai Shaleh Darat addresses in his writings is *sadjen*. The term means a mixed feature of food and burned incense placed in small bucket “for the well-being for of the deceased.”²⁶ In other word, as *Geertz* describes, *sadjen* is “a special offering for the spirits ...”²⁷ For example, peasants would place *sadjen* in their field because of the belief that spirits, *danyang*, have an absolute control of the field. They try to maintain the good relationship with, or to show their respect to *danyang* so the spirits do not interfere with their business.

Shaleh’s answer to this belief is a firm and unshakable one. He categorize the act of giving *sadjen* with underlying reason to show respect and to belief the great power of

²²Woodward and Association for Asian Studies., *Islam in Java*, 53–60.

²³Woodward., 57.

²⁴Woodward, *Java, Indonesia and Islam*, 116. See also Howard M. Federspiel, *Islam and Ideology in the Emerging Indonesian State: The Persatuan Islam (Persis), 1923 to 1957* (BRILL, 2001), 335.

²⁵Woodward, *Java, Indonesia and Islam*, 116. See also Federspiel, *Islam and Ideology in the Emerging Indonesian State*, 335.

²⁶Chamberlain, *Caribbean Migration*, 115.

²⁷Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 41.

danyang into apostasy.²⁸ Salim shows that the reason for this judgement is because it breaks the governing maxim of Islam, namely “*Tauhīd*.”²⁹ To believe in One God means that only Him could actually give benefit and avoid harm on human. To violate this doctrine means an apostasy (*murtad*). Kiai Shaleh sets three aspects from which someone is defined as an apostate.³⁰ First, based on their convictions, that is when someone rejects the obligatory of firm religious obligations, such as five canonical prayers.³¹ Second, based on their sayings, for example when someone says that “God is three.”³² Third, based on their outward behavior or clothes, for example when someone gives *sadjen* to “spirits.”³³ Shaleh values that *sadjen* violates “*Tauhīd*”, because someone believes that *danyang* could give benefit and avoid harm on us. The act of *sadjen* is analogically the same with worshipping idols.

Shaleh’s belief is deeply rooted in the Islamic teaching. His basis is what the Prophet of Islam teaches when he faces paganism of the Arab. In the section *The prophet and pre-Islamic creed and rituals*, we have pointed out to the Islamic response towards the idea of mixing beliefs between paganism and Islam. This is the golden rule on the relation between Islam and local belief and if we would like to distinguish between *santri* and *abangan*, as Geertz uses them, the only things that differentiates the two is their responds to this idea. The former rejects the idea of ascribing supernatural power to *danyang*, whereas, the former confirms the notion and shows their beliefs in giving *sadjen*.

D. Conclusion

There are some conclusions we would like to highlight here. First, when Islam enters into a new civilization, it provides two expressions. In the one hand, an infinite flexibility is the key factor for it builds on old civilization and gives new meaning and strength to the symbolical language of the rituals. On the other, Islam strictly denounces any doctrine and creed that are exactly the opposite to its foundation, that is the Unity of God (*Tauhīd*). Second, in specific case in Javanese Muslim, Kiai Shaleh values that *slametan* is the exact example for the former. In contrast to what some western scholars,

²⁸Samarani, *Majmū’at al-Sharī’ah al-Kāfiyah lil-’Awwām*, 23–24.

²⁹Abdul Salim, “Majmu’at Al-Shari’ah Al-Kafiyah Li Al-’Awam Karya Kiyai Saleh Darat” (Ph.D Thesis, UIN Jakarta, 1994), 191.

³⁰Samarani, *Majmū’at Al-Sharī’ah Al-Kāfiyah Lil-’Awwām*, 23–24.

³¹Ibnu Fikri, *Konstruksi Nasionalisme Perspektif Ulama Jawa Tengah Abad XIX (Analisis Filologis terhadap Karya-Karya Kyai Sholeh Darat Semarang)* (Semarang: Lembaga Penelitian dan Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat IAIN Walisongo, 2013), 75.

³²Salim, “Majmu’at al-Shari’ah Al-Kafiyah li al-’Awam Karya Kiyai Saleh Darat,” 191.

³³Salim.

such as Geertz, and Muslim fundamentalist, Shaleh confirms the Islamic basis of *slametan*. We also point to the deep-rooted practice of it in Muslim communities of South and Indian and/or of Persian from which Javanese Islam originates. On the other antipode, *sadjen* is the representative example which sets the limit of toleration in Islamic orthodoxy. In his writings, Kiai Shaleh ensure that the action of believing in the great power of *danyang* is an apostasy. He purifies the Islamic doctrine of *tauḥīd* from any deviation that entirely destroys its foundation.

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