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## Maneuver in the narrative space: Lessons from Islam Nusantara

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The history of Islam in the East Indies region, now dominated by Indonesia, is the history of maneuver in the narrative space. Strategically located at the junction of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, the vast archipelago, which Indonesians call *Nusantara*, has been a meeting point of different cultures and religions for thousands of years. It is also home to one of the world's pre-eminent "crossroads civilizations," whose encounter with Islam during the past 14 centuries has produced many object lessons of value to those concerned by the threat to international peace and security posed by Islamist extremism and terror.

The original inhabitants of the East Indies archipelago embraced an indigenous spirituality that was often centered on the worship of Sang

Hyang Taya – The Great Void, or Absolute – as the unmanifest source of creation. As the prominent historian and Islamic scholar Kyai Haji Agus Sanyoto explains in the film “Rahmat Islam Nusantara” (“The Divine Grace of East Indies Islam”), “Although the word ‘taya’ literally means ‘That which is Not,’ it does not imply nonexistence. True, ‘That’ does not exist on a physical plane; yet ‘That’ does exist. ‘That’ is empty, yet full. This cannot be explained in purely rational terms, which is why Sang Hyang Taya came to be described with the phrase, ‘*Tankeno kinoyo ngopo*’ – That to which nothing can be done. The mind cannot grasp ‘That,’ which lies beyond human concepts. Nor can ‘That’ be approached using any of the five senses. That’s why the ancients used the term ‘*suwung*’ or ‘*awang-uwung*’: ‘That’ is ... yet is not. ‘That’ is not ... yet is.”

Those familiar with the precepts of mysticism, such as “the belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience” (Merriam-Webster), will immediately recognize a description of the Divine essence not unlike that expressed by mystics from all the world’s major religious traditions. When Hinduism and Buddhism arrived during the early centuries of the Common Era, many inhabitants of the East Indies readily embraced these new religions, which they regarded as different expressions of a single reality, or truth, that was already long familiar to them. The 14th-century Javanese court poet Mpu Tantular gave voice to this unitary vision in his poem “Sutasoma,” from which Indonesia’s national motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Oneness Amid Diversity), is

derived.

Islam arrived in the East Indies within decades of its birth, brought by Arab traders in search of spices or bound for the Tang dynasty port of Guangzhou, where a large Muslim community is known to have existed during the early 8th century. Arab and Persian merchant ships routinely sailed through the East Indies, their lives and precious cargo protected by a succession of maritime powers centered on the islands of Sumatra (the Buddhist kingdom of Srivijaya, 650-1288) and Java. The Spice Islands were an integral part of the Great Silk Road that linked China with the Middle East, Europe and North Africa. For more than 1,000 years, the precepts of Buddhism spread peacefully along a circular route from the original Buddhist heartland in the Ganges basin through modern-day Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia to China, Korea and Japan, and simultaneously along a southern maritime route that linked India with Southeast Asia and Han China. While competing empires and dynasties rose and fell from power throughout this vast region, the spread of Buddhism through Central, East and Southeast Asia, along with the sociocultural, economic and civilizational “flowering” that accompanied this spread, provide an outstanding example, in world history, of intercultural dialogue and the peaceful dispersion of knowledge, spirituality and trade.

This gradual evolutionary process of “deposition” and “erosion” within the “narrative space terrain” (cf, Brian L Steed, “Maneuvering within Islam’s narrative space”) was temporarily disrupted, in Central Asia, by the tectonic shift that accompanied

the Arab conquest, which the indigenous Persian-speaking population fiercely resisted throughout the Umayyad caliphate (661-750). This military and cultural resistance to Arab domination may explain why the Abbasid caliphate, which came to power with the support of an army composed of Arabs, Persians and Turks “carrying black flags from Khurasan” (ie, Central Asia), launched an era of scientific, philosophical and spiritual creativity that Dr Frederick Starr has described in his book, “The Lost Enlightenment,” as “Central Asia’s golden age.” He writes: “By far the most conspicuous feature of Central Asia’s crossroads civilization was its pluralism and diversity. This did not end with the Arab conquest but, as we shall see, continued to thrive for nearly four centuries after the arrival of Islam. Conversion proceeded very slowly. Indeed, Muslim theologians themselves acknowledged that many people of other faiths nominally embraced Islam but did not abandon their prior faiths. The British classicist Peter Brown speaks of Islam resting ‘lightly, like a mist’ over the highly diverse religious landscape. Only in the combative eleventh century did pluralism come to be seen as an evil and as a threat to the prevailing orthodoxy. By the time such a view took hold, the Age of Enlightenment was already approaching its end.”

Ultimately, Central Asia’s tradition of religious pluralism and tolerance fell victim to a combination of erosional and tectonic forces that overwhelmed the long-dominant Persian culture of the region. One was the spread and gradual entrenchment of religious formalism. Another closely related factor was

the rise to military and political supremacy, throughout the Middle East, of Turkish tribes that tended to embrace those narratives, within Islam, that legitimize conquest and the subjugation of infidels. To this day, the name Mahmud of Ghazni is employed by Hindu nationalists to evoke the cruelty of Muslim armies that laid waste to northern India during the 11th century, massacring and enslaving Hindus on a scale that far exceeds anything yet accomplished by the Islamic State (ISIS).

Less than two centuries later, a Turkic army destroyed the renowned complex of Buddhist monasteries at Nalanda, in eastern India, which had served as a hub of international Buddhism, linking the maritime and overland Silk Roads, for nearly eight centuries. Turkic warriors burned the ancient libraries and slaughtered monks who had not fled the approaching army. Although erosional forces had long been at work, it was a profound tectonic event that brought the Buddhist narrative to a close in its very birthplace, along the Gangetic plain of northeast India. A third, decisive factor in the eclipse of Central Asia’s “age of enlightenment” was the Mongol conquest, which depopulated much of the region and systematically wrecked the vast and highly complex irrigation system upon which an ancient civilization depended for its agricultural productivity.

As we shall see, the tectonic forces that devastated Central Asia also led to the Islamization of the East Indies, more than 700 years after the initial appearance of Muslim traders and proselytizers in the Malay archipelago, during the reign of Caliph Umar bin Khattab (634-44 CE).

The Mongol armies that destroyed Central Asia (1219-21) and the Abbasid caliphate (1258) also conquered China. Kublai Khan, who founded the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), brought hundreds of thousands of Central Asians to China, where they served as a military and administrative interface between the Mongol overlords and their ethnic Chinese subjects, whom the Mongols did not trust. Marrying locally, these Central Asians came to form a major component of a distinct ethnic group within China known as Hui Muslims, whose prominent role within Chinese government was soon to have a profound influence on the sociocultural and political dynamics of Nusantara (East Indies) civilization.

In 1293, Kublai Khan sent a large punitive expedition against the Hindu/Buddhist Singhasari dynasty, based in Java, which had replaced the kingdom of Srivijaya as the dominant maritime power in the Malay archipelago and refused to acknowledge Mongol suzerainty. Small vassal states throughout the archipelago, including many along the coasts of Sumatra and the Malay peninsula, quickly submitted to Kublai Khan's maritime expedition, which was commanded by a Hui general and consisted primarily of Hui and ethnic Chinese soldiers. Although the Mongol expedition ultimately ended in defeat and disgrace at the hands of Raden Wijaya, founder of the Majapahit dynasty, it helped set in motion a process whereby, over the next two centuries, political power in the East Indies – and, hence, the official state religion – gradually shifted from Hindu/Buddhist to Muslim polities. It is noteworthy that the first

Muslim state in present-day Indonesia was established in 1297, when the ruler of Pasai, in northern Sumatra, converted to Islam.

This process accelerated dramatically a century later, when the Yongle emperor of the Ming dynasty, who came to power with Muslim support and whose mother was said to be descended from Hui Muslims, dispatched a massive Chinese naval expedition to Southeast Asia led by a Hui admiral named Zheng He (aka "Cheng Ho"). Zheng He was the great-great-grandson of Sayyid Ajal Shams al-Din Omar, a Persian who served in the administration of the Mongol empire and was the governor of Yunnan during the early Yuan dynasty. Zheng He's grandfather was a *hajji*, a Muslim who had performed the pilgrimage to Mecca.

In 1405, Zheng He visited northern Java on the first of seven Chinese naval expeditions to Southeast Asia, India, Arabia and East Africa during the next 28 years. These expeditions, each comprising hundreds of ships and crews numbering more than 20,000, many of them Hui Muslims, were ostensibly commercial and diplomatic in character, yet also constituted an overwhelming display of force by the Ming dynasty, which was sufficient to permanently transform the political and religious dynamics of the East Indies. The expeditions' immediate impact was to stimulate trade, destabilize the Hindu/Buddhist Majapahit empire, which claimed suzerainty over the Malay archipelago, and accelerate the process of Islamization throughout the region. That these results were intentional is suggested by the fact that Zheng He not only shielded a rebellious minor principality in Melaka, whose ruler converted



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to Islam in 1414, from Majapahit retribution, but also transformed the regional balance of power by designating Melaka as the primary base of the Chinese fleet in Southeast Asia and its commercial entrepôt.

Zheng He is also reported to have established an Overseas Chinese Bureau, based in Champa (present-day central and southern Vietnam), to govern diaspora Chinese in Southeast Asia and project strategic influence throughout the region. The bureau was controlled by Hui Muslims, handpicked and appointed by Zheng He himself, who encouraged diaspora Chinese to embrace Islam, financed the construction of mosques for Chinese communities and favored Chinese Muslims in the awarding of contracts for trade and service at his armada's many ports of call.

This impetus for ethnic Chinese to embrace Islam was heightened by the access conversion provided to international trade networks dominated by Arab, Indian, Chinese (Hui) and Malay Muslim traders.

Thus, over a period of nearly three decades (1405-33), Majapahit's ability to govern its dependencies throughout the Malay archipelago was severely eroded by the Ming dynasty's foreign policy, which was designed to "fragment the barbarians" and encourage local rulers to establish a direct tribute relationship with China. Then, as suddenly and unexpectedly as they had appeared, the massive Chinese fleets vanished from Southeast Asian waters, leaving a power vacuum in their wake. Following Zheng He's death, the Ming emperor (Xuande) decided to cease funding naval

expeditions. This coincided with the fall of the eunuch faction at the Ming court in Beijing, many of whom were Hui Muslims, and the rise to power of Confucian scholar-bureaucrats who opposed engagement with the Outer Barbarians of the Western Ocean.

Its maritime – and, hence, economic – lifeline severed by Chinese intervention, the Majapahit empire fell into an advanced state of decay, enabling the spread of Muslim city-states along the coasts of Sumatra, the Malay peninsula, Borneo, Sulawesi and the Maluku, which promptly declared independence from their Hindu/Buddhist overlords. The tide of political Islam reached Java in 1478, when a Chinese Muslim harbor master named Jin Bun murdered an aristocratic Javanese governor (*adipati*), assumed the title “Raden Patah” and established the Islamic sultanate of Demak.

Closely allied with Chinese and Arab Muslims who lived in maritime ports along the north coast of Java, Demak drew upon familiar Islamic narratives to legitimize waging war (ie, *jihad*) upon the severely weakened Majapahit empire. These narratives were largely identical to those employed by Muslim conquerors throughout Islamic history and may be readily traced to specific elements of orthodox, authoritative Islam and its historic practice, including those portions of *fiqh* (classical Islamic law, aka *Shariah*) that enjoin Islamic supremacy, encourage enmity toward non-Muslims and require the establishment of an Islamic state, whose ruler unifies and leads the community of Muslims in what amounts to a perpetual state of war, which may be periodically interrupted by truce, against any who refuse to submit to Islam.

After decades of intermittent warfare, the Demak army, led by Raden Patah’s son, Sultan Trenggono, finally sacked the infidels’ (ie, Majapahit) capital, torched the sacred Hindu and Buddhist scriptures and scattered the indigenous Javanese nobility, priests and court followers across the mountainous landscape of southern Java, from whence many fled to Bali. For nearly 25 years, Sultan Trenggono waged annual *jihad* campaigns in southern and eastern Java, in order to break the resistance of the local Javanese aristocracy and landed gentry, known as *kyais*, who rejected his ultimatum to embrace Islam and refused to abandon their ancestral homes, land and followers to live in impoverished exile.

It was during this formative period of Islamic conquest that the first Javanese narratives about Islam began to take shape. Many of these concern the role of Muslim saints in adapting and propagating the essence of Islamic teachings within the context of Javanese culture, and contrast the saints’ behavior with that of Arab and Chinese militants who weaponized specific elements of classical Islamic orthodoxy in order to justify their seizure of economic and political power.

Among the more famous, and controversial, of these narratives concerns the life, teachings and death of Seh Siti Jenar, whom Javanese historical narratives describe as “His Highness”; the “Prince of Gnostics”; the “Shaykh”; “Seh Sunyata Jatimurti,” or “He Who Has Attained the Absolute Void as Reality Incarnate”; the “Susunan of Lemah Abang”; “a humble peasant risen to become a saint”; and “a worm, transformed by sacred knowledge into

the self-aware manifestation of God Himself.”

Among Siti Jenar’s disciples were the members of a Sufi (ie, Islamic spiritual) brotherhood of *kyais*, or local lords, numbering some 40 men, who led a network of mystical Islamic communities spread across rural central Java. Although all had pronounced the *shahada* (Muslim confession of faith) and converted to Islam, they remained steeped in the ancient Javanese tradition of religious pluralism and tolerance, and thus chose to embrace a mystical, rather than supremacist, interpretation and practice of Islam. Mapped out, their locations composed a web that skirted and nearly encircled Raden Patah’s court-city of Demak. While Siti Jenar’s network of disciples threatened Demak’s temporal authority, his teachings were perceived as an even greater threat by orthodox religious leaders affiliated with the kingdom of Demak.

Siti Jenar dared to reveal the inner sanctum of truth (*haqiqah* and *ma’rifah*), without requiring that his followers observe even the most basic tenets of Islamic law, such as ritual prayer and fasting during the month of Ramadan. Instead, he set about organizing the countryside along the lines of a great spiritual community, in which *kyais* ruled the local population with a gentle hand and left everyone free to worship according to their own conscience. Siti Jenar’s example, and that of his disciples, was enough to attract a large following, and to incur a death sentence from the orthodox religious and political leaders in Demak.

Sunan Kudus, head of the militant Islamic faction in north-central Java, eventually

executed Siti Jenar as a heretic, in Demak’s great public square, before a crowd of thousands. Eyewitnesses later described how Siti Jenar had laughed in the face of death and went, ecstatic, to his apotheosis. At the slash of Sunan Kudus’s sword, blood spat from Siti Jenar’s severed neck to spell “*la illaha ilallah*” (“there is no God but Allah”) in the dirt, and word quickly spread throughout the land of Java that this was a message from God himself – a divine symbol, indisputably proving that Siti Jenar, and not his executioner, was the true and faithful Muslim.

The late Indonesian president and longtime chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, once told this author that Siti Jenar was condemned for publicly teaching the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud* (“the unicity of being”) and for revealing spiritual practices that lead to the union of the individual soul with God (*manunggaling kawula gusti*), which undermined the authority of religious fundamentalists. To this day in Java, the narrative of Siti Jenar provides a clear demarcation between Muslim fundamentalists and those who are committed to religious pluralism and tolerance. Extremists often denounce Siti Jenar as an infidel and apostate, while spiritual luminaries, such as President Wahid, generally regard his mystical teachings as an expression of the highest truth of Islam and of reality itself.

As the Persian mystic Jalaluddin Rumi wrote of an Arab saint who encountered a similar fate in 10th century Baghdad: “When Mansur al-Hallaj attained the state of utmost friendship with God, he became his own enemy and cast away his life. He said, ‘*Ana ‘l-Haq*’

(‘I am the truth’), meaning, ‘Mansur al-Hallaj has vanished and God alone remains.’ This is true humility. You who proclaim: ‘Thou art God and I am your servant’ display arrogance [rooted in egotism and profound spiritual ignorance], for you thereby affirm your own

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[transitory and illusory] existence, rather than divine unity (*tawhid*). To proclaim ‘He is God’ also affirms dualism, for until ‘I’ [the state of divine unity] exists, ‘He’ [personal knowledge of God’s existence] is impossible. ... Therefore it was not Mansur al-Hallaj, but rather, God alone who proclaimed ‘I am the Truth,’ since Mansur’s individual identity had already vanished.”

**F**ive hundred years after the death of Siti Jenar, narratives affirming or disputing his status as a saint (or infidel) continue to shape the religious and political landscape of Indonesia. In 2004, the most popular musical

group in Muslim Southeast Asia, Dewa, whose previous album had sold approximately 10 million copies, released a new album titled “Laskar Cinta,” or “The Warriors of Love.”

It constituted a direct challenge and rebuke to those who sympathized with the group Laskar Jihad, which had participated in a religious civil war in eastern Indonesia and was founded by a veteran of the Afghan jihad who claimed personal familiarity with Osama bin Laden. Dewa’s new album swiftly rose to the top of Indonesia’s charts and two of its songs became number one hits in Indonesia and on MTV Asia. One of these songs, titled “Satu” (“Oneness”), was explicitly dedicated to Siti Jenar and employed, as its lyrics, a famous saying conveyed by the Prophet Muhammad but regarded by Muslims as a direct statement by God Himself (*hadith qudsi*), which affirms and validates the spiritual vision of al-Hallaj, Rumi and Siti Jenar.

As President Wahid wrote in *The Washington Post* (“From Indonesia, Songs Against Terrorism”): “Dhani and the other members of Dewa have presented Indonesia’s youth with a stark choice, and one easy for most to answer: Do they want to join the army of *jihad*, or the army of love? Dhani and his group are on the front lines of a global conflict, defending Islam from its fanatical hijackers. In a world all too often marred by hatred and violence committed in the name of religion, they seek to rescue an entire generation from Wahhabi-financed extremists whose goal is to transform Muslim youth into holy warriors and suicide bombers. For every young Indonesian seduced by the ideology of hatred and fanaticism – including those



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responsible for the recent, awful attacks in Bali – countless others see through the extremists’ web of lies and hatred, in no small part thanks to the visionary courage of people like Ahmad Dhani. For as they listen to Dewa’s music, the hearts of millions of young Indonesians have been inspired to declare: ‘No to the warriors of *jihad*! Yes to the warriors of love!’ ”

In 2005, while publicly defending Ahmad Dhani and Dewa from extremist accusations of apostasy, President Wahid leaned over and whispered to me: “You know, Holland, fundamentalists are always trying to annihilate mysticism. But they can never succeed, because it’s impossible to annihilate that which arises from the depths of human experience.”

Subsequent developments in Ahmad Dhani’s life only go to prove the incompetence and failure of governments to support such positive narratives.

For more than 100 years, from 1478 to 1586, these opposing forces struggled for the soul of Java – and, ultimately, for that of Islam – in a war whose decisive engagements occurred not only on the field of battle, but in the hearts and minds of countless individuals scattered across the lush, tropical landscape of Java. For in this conflict between fundamentalist *jihadists* and Sufi (mystically inclined) Muslims, the Sufis’ profound spiritual ideology, popularized among the masses by storytellers and musicians, played

a role even more vital than that of economics or pure military force in defeating religious extremism in Java.

One such figure, Sunan Kalijogo, who to this day remains the pre-eminent patron saint of Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest mass Islamic group, taught his disciples a mystical brand of Islam that readily harmonized with pre-existing elements of traditional Javanese culture. Revered by Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims alike, Kalijogo's teachings formed a stark contrast to the militant brand of Islam espoused by Sunan Kudus and were in fact aligned with the *wahdat al-wujud* doctrine of Seh Siti Jenar, which represents the core teaching of the great Sufi mystic Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1234 in Damascus, Syria) and his respected line of disciples, including Abd al-Karim al-Jili (1366-1424).

At the end of this multigenerational conflict, a new dynasty arose, founded on the principle of "the throne for the people," which established religious tolerance as the rule of law and restored freedom of conscience to all Javanese. This was 200 years before similar ideas took firm political root in the West, through passage of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom and the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. The founder of that dynasty was a Javanese Sufi Muslim and disciple of Sunan Kalijogo named Senopati ing Alogo. The basis of his victory was the popular appeal of Senopati's message of religious freedom, justice, respect for Javanese cultural identity and profound inner spirituality, in contrast to the fanaticism and tyranny of his political opponents.

Mataram, the name Sunan Kalijogo's

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disciples gave to the region of south-central Java now known as Yogyakarta, and to the Islamic dynasty they founded, was loaded with symbolism. In addition to evoking the 9th century Mataram kingdom, which, centered nearby, was the first Javanese dynasty to adopt a syncretic form of Hinduism/Buddhism, the name explicitly combined the Sanskrit terms for "mother" (*matr*) and "*Ram*," the seventh avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu, who came to earth to destroy the demon-king Ravana. Within the context of 16th century Javanese culture, the narrative was clear: Senopati ing Alogo was like Rama, the incarnation of Vishnu; his guru, Sunan Kalijogo, a contemporary *rishi*, or "seer of ultimate Reality"; his followers, the devout Hanoman and his army of *varanas* (forest-dwellers); and Demak, the equivalent of Lanka, the demon kingdom from which Ravana and his followers (ie, Arab and Chinese fanatics) had issued forth to massacre, rape and enslave human beings – thereby disrupting the harmony of nature and the tranquil worship of God by religious devotees.

The Javanese victory over Demak gave birth to a set of narratives that have continued to evolve to the present day, through the process of deposition and erosion so aptly described by Brian Steed in the lead essay, “Maneuver in Islam’s narrative space.” These narratives initially assumed the form of oral and written histories such as the “Babad Tanah Jawi” (“History of the Land of Java”), which were composed by highly skilled poets retained by the court of Mataram. Over time, these narratives found expression in virtually every mode of Javanese art, education and culture, and were both deliberately and spontaneously inculcated, from generation to generation, at every level of Javanese society, from the palace to remote villages.

As Jadul Maula, director of the film “Rahmat Islam Nusantara,” has said: “When the saints molded their disciples and taught them how to achieve spiritual perfection, they deliberately chose not to alienate people from their own history, culture, traditions or physical environment. As a result, we can still discern their footprints, for a wide variety of Islamic identities emerged when the saints began to Islamize the East Indies archipelago: Javanese Islam, West Sumatran Islam, Achenese Islam, Sasak Islam, Buginese Islam. Yet a golden thread runs throughout these various expressions of Islam. For the process of Islamization encouraged the attainment of spiritual perfection, without annihilating the unique characteristics of each local culture that embraced the new religion.

“There is a basic teaching [within traditional Sunni Islam]: ‘Invite people to travel the path to God’ – and this needs to be emphasized:

‘Invite people to travel the path to God,’ not to join any particular sect or clique. Don’t invite others to embrace [a specific] religion, but rather, to travel the path to God Himself. And in order to do this, people must travel an inner, spiritual path: ie, the path of the soul.

“To cite one example: many saints used art to convey their teachings. It is known from the ancient tales that Sunan Kalijogo wandered throughout Java, performing as a shadow puppet master. Using shadow-puppet theater (*wayang kulit*), Sunan Kalijogo taught people to engage in introspection, to know themselves. Many people nowadays have difficulty understanding this kind of *da’wa* (Islamic proselytism), especially if they’re trapped by concepts regarding religious identity. For example, they may regard *wayang kulit* as a Hindu art form.

“Yet the reason saints adopted *wayang* is because its symbols and stories were extremely popular. They didn’t want to alienate people from their own culture, and thus reworked these popular stories in such a way as to incorporate Islamic teachings that served as a mirror for self-reflection and a means to acquire self-knowledge. This illustrates how the early saints employed wise methods, including stories that were entertaining rather than didactic, and not in the least alien to their audience. People were encouraged to find their own path to God, and to encounter God, knowing that this encounter was the direct result of attaining a state of human perfection. “People were taught, first and foremost, to be fully human and thus humane. This differs from most contemporary *da’wa*, which encourages people to embrace religion



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before they've become fully human. When inhumane people practice religion, they bring their personal defects to the practice of religion itself. By engaging in *da'wa* that emphasized spiritual perfection and its attendant humane behavior, the Wali Songo (Nine Saints) adopted an approach that was universally acceptable within Nusantara society. People of all faiths were willing to lend an ear to such teachings, which are of immense value to anyone, regardless of their ethnicity or religion. And thus the impact of the saints' *da'wa* was widely perceived as beneficial to society at large."

It is important to note that these narratives were not hostile to Islam or opposed to its primary message of *rahmah* (divine mercy

and compassion). Rather, the disciples of Sunan Kalijogo who crafted these narratives succeeded in dominating the moral and theological high ground and neutralized religious supremacism by positioning Islam as the noble embodiment of truth and a source of universal love and compassion (Koran, 21:107). Similarly, these narratives portrayed the Prophet Muhammad as the Messenger of God, who came to earth for no purpose other than to perfect moral character and virtue. As may be evident from these scriptural citations, both of the aforementioned narratives regarding Islam and the Prophet are fully orthodox and consistent with the view of Islam and its Prophet held by the majority of the world's Muslims.

What distinguishes Indonesia from other regions of the Muslim world is one simple fact: only in Nusantara, and most notably Java, did a pluralistic, tolerant and spiritual understanding of Islam achieve lasting military and political dominance, which it has continued to maintain – despite numerous, sometimes bloody challenges – for more than 450 years.

The fundamental problem the Javanese faced, and that Indonesia continues to face today, lies in the fact that orthodox Islam also contains the violent and supremacist narratives employed to such devastating effect by Mahmud of Ghazni, Sultan Trenggono and contemporary social media *jihadists* who employ these very same narratives when summoning Muslims to join a global insurrection against the current world order.

As Kyai Haji A Mustofa Bisri, spiritual leader of Nahdlatul Ulama, told a gathering of 400 senior Islamic scholars in 2014, at the culminating event of a six-week-long Festival of East Indies Saints: “A previous speaker mentioned that it was my idea to hold this festival, and indeed it’s been on my mind for quite some time. The idea arose from my concern that in recent years, Islamic proselytism (*da’wa*) has been violating the principles advocated by the noble Prophet Muhammad, may the peace and blessings of God be upon him. The Prophet advised those who proselytize to make things easy for other people, not cause them to flee in terror. And yet, lately, it is precisely *da’wa* that makes people feel horrified and appalled by Islam.”

He continued: “Genuine Islam, Islam Nusantara, Indonesian Islam, the Islam taught by the Messenger of God, may the peace

and blessings of God be upon him, has been supplanted by Saudi Islam ... a grasping and materialistic Islam ... coarse, cruel and savage. I am absolutely certain that our understanding of Islam is shared by the majority of Muslims worldwide, and that (the Wahhabi/ISIS) view is just a ghoulish nightmare that keeps the world awake at night, trembling in horror.”

Indonesia’s founding fathers were steeped in the history of Islam Nusantara and recognized the threat posed by religious supremacism, which influenced their decision to establish Indonesia as a multireligious and pluralistic state. Their wisdom and ability to maneuver in the narrative space also inspired Indonesia’s founding president, Soekarno, and members of his cabinet to adopt Vishnu’s mount, the eagle Garuda, tightly gripping a banner emblazoned with the phrase *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Oneness Amid Diversity) between its extended claws as the symbol of their new nation. When confronted by the Darul Islam rebellion (1949-62), which sought to transform Indonesia into an Islamic state, Soekarno, leaders of Nahdlatul Ulama and other Indonesian nationalists drew upon the legacy of Islam Nusantara to delegitimize and crush the armed rebellion, whose adherents routinely beheaded their opponents, much like ISIS today.

In the 1950s, when Islamists sought to implement *fiqh* (classical Islamic law) and transform Indonesia into an Islamic state through political means, Kyai Wahab Chasbullah, co-founder of Nahdlatul Ulama and chairman of its Supreme Council, withdrew NU from the Islamist-dominated political party Masyumi, aligned NU with

Soekarno and orchestrated the defeat of Masyumi's agenda at the polls. The relative success of Indonesia's democracy after the fall of Soekarno's successor, Soeharto, in contrast to the stark failure of the Arab Spring and the sociopolitical train wreck unfolding throughout the Middle East, may be attributed to Indonesian Muslims' heritage and their ability to maneuver in the narrative space. Yet Indonesia is not immune to the threat posed by religious extremism, which Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, Pakistan and other state and nonstate actors have deliberately nurtured and exported worldwide for decades, in their struggle to maintain or acquire political, economic and military power.

The dramatic events on display before, during and after the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election illustrate the manner in which rival narratives, within Islamic orthodoxy, continue to shape the political landscape within the world's largest Muslim-majority nation and democracy. As reported in *The Diplomat*, "Mainstream political elites [used] religious and ethnic appeals to delegitimize a candidate ... to crush an opponent," referring to the Chinese Christian governor of Jakarta, Basuki "Ahok" Purnama.

As NU general secretary Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf observed at the time, the manner in which obsolete elements of Islamic orthodoxy were mobilized to defeat Ahok have "legitimized [Dutch politician] Geert Wilders' effort, in the Netherlands, to revoke Islam's protected status as a religion and instead declare Islam to be a subversive political ideology. Hopefully we will not

witness Muslim minorities around the world experience restrictions upon their religious freedom, their right to enter other countries or even forcible expulsion" as a result of actions



by those who seek to weaponize Islam for political purposes.

Recognizing this danger, in May 2016 Nahdlatul Ulama hosted the International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL), attended by approximately 400 traditional Muslim scholars from 30 nations. At the summit's conclusion, the NU central board promulgated a 16-point declaration that affirmed the mainstream nature of the NU's understanding and practice of traditional Sunni Islam; identified the salient factors driving Islamist extremism and terror

worldwide; and committed the NU to develop a global alliance capable of addressing the twin threats of Sunni and Shiite extremism.

The event featured expert presentations and detailed discussion of the relationship between Islam and nationalism; the unchecked spread of religious extremism, terror, armed conflict in the Middle East and a rising tide of Islamophobia in the West; the role of certain Middle East governments in fostering the spread of sectarian hatred; and the need for an honest appraisal of, and response to, Islamist extremism and terror.

Widely covered by international media, the summit and NU declaration explicitly identified “specific modes of interpreting Islam as the most significant factor causing the spread of religious extremism among Muslims” (point 8); cast a spotlight on Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Iran for their role in having “weaponiz[ed] sectarian differences ... nurtured religious extremism, and stimulated the spread of terrorism throughout the world” (point 9); identified religious extremism and terror among Muslims as “directly contributing to the rise of Islamophobia throughout the non-Muslim world” (point 10); called upon “people of good will of every faith and nation to join in building a global consensus not to politicize Islam” (point 15); and explicitly affirmed that the NU “will strive to consolidate the global *ablussunnah wal jamaah* (Sunni Muslim) community, in order to bring about a world in which Islam, and Muslims, are truly beneficent and contribute to the well-being of all humanity” (point 16).

In response to the ISOMIL/Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration, the NU young adults

movement, Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, has taken concrete steps to operationalize this global effort, acting under the guidance of senior NU theologians.

Following months of careful preparation, in the spring of 2017 Ansor announced the launch of a concerted effort to promote humanitarian Islam (*al-islam li al-insaniyyah*) by developing and operationalizing a global strategy to recontextualize (ie, reform) the teachings of orthodox, authoritative Islam and thereby reconcile certain problematic elements of classical Islamic law with the reality of contemporary civilization, whose context and conditions differ significantly from those in which classical Islamic law emerged. As *The New York Times* headlined its coverage of the humanitarian Islam campaign: “Indonesians Seek to Export a Modernized Vision of Islam ... pressing governments around the world to bring Islamic law into line with 21st century norms.”

Ansor quickly followed up in May 2017, when more than 300 Indonesian religious scholars gathered in East Java with colleagues from South Asia, the Middle East, Europe and North America to address “obsolete tenets of classical Islamic law, which are premised upon perpetual conflict with those who do not embrace or submit to Islam.”

A Mustofa Bisri opened the event with a prayer that the assembled scholars’ deliberations would constitute “a humble act of religious piety and a blessing for all humanity ... [as well as] the starting point of a movement that may bring the rays of enlightenment to a desperate world.” The two-day international gathering of *ulama* concluded with the

adoption of an 8,000 word analysis of the manner in which state and nonstate actors have “weaponized” orthodox Islamic teachings, and a detailed road map that calls for “a serious, long-term sociocultural, political, religious and educational campaign to transform Muslims’ understanding of their religious obligations, and the very nature of Islamic orthodoxy.”

In the words of Ansor chairman H Yaqut Qoumas, which also appear in the 21-page strategy document titled “Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam”: “No progress can be made towards neutralizing a threat, unless it is understood and identified. It is false and counterproductive to claim that the actions of Al Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram and other such groups have nothing to do with Islam, or merely represent a perversion of Islamic teachings. They are, in fact, outgrowths of Wahhabism and other fundamentalist streams of Sunni Islam.” The declaration goes on to state, “If Muslims do not address the key tenets of Islamic orthodoxy that authorize and explicitly enjoin such violence, anyone, at any time, may harness the orthodox teachings of Islam to defy what they claim to be the illegitimate laws and authority of an infidel state and butcher their fellow

citizens, regardless of whether they live in the Islamic world or the West. This is the bloody thread that links so many current events, from Egypt, Syria and Yemen to the streets of Mumbai, Jakarta, Berlin, Nice, Stockholm and Westminster.”

“Muslims face a choice between starkly different visions of the future. Will they strive to recreate the long-lost ideal of religious, political and territorial unity beneath the banner of a caliphate – and thus seek to restore Islamic supremacy – as reflected in their communal memory and still firmly entrenched within the prevailing corpus, and worldview, of orthodox, authoritative Islam? Or will they strive to develop a new religious sensibility that reflects the actual circumstances of our modern civilization, and contributes to the emergence of a truly just and harmonious world order, founded upon respect for the equal dignity and rights of every human being?” the declaration said.

These issues are of direct, legitimate and vital concern to every nation on earth. For state and nonstate actors’ response to these questions, and their consequent maneuver in the narrative space, will shape the future of humanity for generations to come. 🌍