

## ***Hybrid Islamic identities in plural worlds of Indonesian Youth***

*Renegotiating the relationship between Indonesia, the Islamic Middle East and the Euro-American West*

### ***Objectives of the research***

The aim of this PhD research shall be to show that Islamic identity constructions of Indonesian students are considerably shaped by a constant renegotiation of the relationship between Indonesia, the Islamic Middle East and the Euro-American West. I would like to discuss this process in its substantial significance by taking youth cultural practices of Islamic students from Yogyakarta as an example.

I depart from the assumption that Islamic students constantly construct and reconstruct their identities by rejecting, adapting and assimilating cultural and religious influences. In these processes of assimilating Islamic Middle Eastern as well as Euro-American influences into varieties of local youth culture, a new type of hybrid identity of young Indonesian Muslims becomes visible. To show the different expressions and the wide significance of this post-colonial renegotiation, I intend to focus on how Islamic as well as European influences affect leisure time activities, fashion, youth subcultures, media consumption, sexual behaviour as well as eating and drinking habits.

I became aware of the great importance the European dominated colonial past still plays in the processes of identity negotiations during the writing of my licentiate thesis about Islamic pop culture in Indonesia, in which I focused on practices of veiling among students. I have not yet dealt with the question of identity constructions from a post-colonial perspective satisfactorily, as I only became aware of its importance in the process of my work. I think this aspect would be very interesting as it will allow viewing expressions of youth culture among Indonesian Muslims in daily life from a different perspective.

The relationship of Indonesian Muslim students towards Europe is quite contradictory. Many students do not distinguish between Europe and America, but just refer to it as “the West”, the way it is transmitted by mass media. On the one hand “Western life” seems to be perceived as modern and desirable, but on the other hand there is a strong will observable to protect oneself and the local culture from Arabic and Euro-American influences – from “Arabisation” (*Arabisasi*) and globalisation (*globalisasi*), often associated with “the West”. I assume that through this negotiation process hybrid forms of identity emerge that often connote with constant border-crossing, mobility, uncertainty and multiplicity. Through this process of identity negotiation in a post-colonial context, the expressions of Islam in Indonesia become diverse and colourful. Mystical Islamic practices for example are becoming increasingly popular among certain student communities. As well, many mystical TV series are broadcast, mystical Islamic books are successfully sold and Indonesian pop bands such as *Padi* use Sufi texts in their songs.

This brings me to the question as to how far contemporary Indonesian youth culture is concerned with the process of globalisation. I do not see that global trends threaten or even make distinctive local practices and identity frames disappear in favour of a homogenized set of consumption practices. I agree with Nilan and Feixa who point out that “the ‘globalisation thesis’ itself is just another colonial discourse, thinly disguising the idea of ‘vanishing’ cultures, implicitly incapable of competing with the cultural products of European civilization” (2006: 3). This PhD research shall be devoted to overcome this colonialist bias in the discourse about cultural globalisation.

## ***State of research***

A lot of excellent studies have been written about processes of social transformation and change in Indonesia and how they affect expressions of Islam, for example Beatty (1999), Brenner (1996), Geertz (1960, 1984), Gibson (2000), Hanneman and Schulte Nordholt (2004), Hefner (1987, 1993, 1999, 2002), Howell (2001), Hudson (1986), Muzakki (2005), Van Dijk (1997), Woodward (1989) and many others.

Most of these works have however one weakness in common: they tend to a greater or smaller extent to present the local Javanese tradition as well as Islam as static and homogenous. Usually if change and transformation processes are described, it is done under consideration of external influences or structural changes, for example in politics that have an influence on the varieties of expressions of Islam. The important role the active and creative individual plays within these structural constraints is very often neglected if not omitted. It will be my aim to integrate this aspect of individual agency without neglecting structural constraints. Furthermore a lot of studies do not take into account the global perspective and the changing relationship between Europe and Indonesia from a post-colonial perspective; they are still trapped in an essentially colonial discourse. As this study is consciously designed in a post-colonial way, it shall capture an extended meaning of the constant renegotiation of identity.

I will approach the expressions that Islam finds in contemporary Indonesian youth culture from a specifically anthropological perspective and see my research and the questions I intend to aboard in the long anthropological research tradition in Indonesia. The fact that Islam in Indonesia is still widely neglected by academics of Islam studies points out the fact that the Javanese religion, *kejawen*, was and still is not perceived by all researchers as a form of Islam<sup>1</sup>. An anthropological perspective seems suitable to relate the various faces of Indonesian Islam to a complex cultural context.

## ***State of my own research***

The research subject brings together different main areas of my studies and my fieldwork experiences in Indonesia. I have worked on the topic of Indonesian youth culture since 2004, writing an analysis on a famous Indonesian teenager film. This was after my first eight months stay in Sumatra between 2003 and 2004. In 2005 I returned to Indonesia and studied at the Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta for eight months as an exchange student. During that time I was also carrying out my fieldwork at that university on Islamic pop culture and the practices of veiling among students. Furthermore I was working on an off-shoot-topic of this fieldwork – the mystical perceptions of Indonesian students, believes in ghosts and how these perceptions permeate other spheres of social life.

During my studies at the Universities of Bern and Yogyakarta, I have been focusing on Indonesia as well as on Islam, popular culture and Indonesian history. I followed several seminars on Indonesia, such as one on popular culture in South East Asia, one on the East Indian Companies and a further one on post-colonialism in Indonesia. I studied about Islam and joined a seminar on reproduction and the construction of knowledge in Muslim societies. While studying in Yogyakarta, I focused on youth culture, Islam, Javanese culture and language as well as postmodernism. As an exchange student I had access to bachelor and masters thesis as well as PhD researches that had been written at different universities in

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<sup>1</sup> I do agree with Woodward in seeing the Javanese religion, *kejawen*, as a form of Islam. Woodward challenges the construction as held for example by Geertz that *kejawen* is “not really Islamic”. He identifies the Islamic sources (largely Sufi) of Javanese mysticism and states that Geertz departs from a too orthodox idea of Islam (Howell 2001: 706).

Yogyakarta. Furthermore I had the possibility to directly contact professors, scholars as well as people working in the field of youth culture and cultural studies. Many of them have assured their support for future research.

My research would stand in a strong tradition of research on Indonesia taking place at the universities of Bern, Basel and Zürich. In particular, it would be linked to the current research project of Sabine Zurschmitten who is working on an anthropological PhD project titled “Staging Difference: Interreligious Conflicts in South and Southeast Asia” at the Karman Centre at the University of Bern, with the aim to elucidate the emergence of interreligious conflicts in Indonesia and collective identities in post-colonial societies. I would be able to benefit from the extensive knowledge on Indonesia and network of researchers existing in Switzerland.

My knowledge of the Indonesian language allows fluent conversation in everyday life situations, as well as discussing abstract subjects, reading academic texts and following classes and seminars.

### ***Field of research***

The selected research location is the city of Yogyakarta on the island of Java, Indonesia. Yogyakarta is a very dynamic and progressive city; mainly because of the high rate of students coming from all over Indonesia, but it is also a city where the local Javanese culture is still very strong, especially in the southern part around the *Kraton*, the Sultan’s palace. In such a diverse setting, it is not surprising that Islamic identity constructions find various and rapidly changing forms in everyday life practices.

I intend to focus on students of the state University *Universitas Gadjah Mada* (UGM) in Yogyakarta, as I perceive students as a particularly active and creative social group, where constant identity construction and reconstruction is an essential issue in daily live. UGM is the oldest and one of the most renowned universities in Indonesia. With currently about 55’000 students it is also the biggest one. The campus is located on an area of 300 hectares and counts 18 faculties. Many of the students are active in some kind of community, for example in a religious organisation, in a sports club, in English discussion groups or a hiking association. Student life is very sociable and lively.

One methodology I intend to use in my research is focus group interviews with members of different student communities. Further information shall be obtained from in-depth interviews with selected students, through participant observation and from mass media products such as teen and lifestyle magazines and TV series. Additionally, I intend to use Indonesian bachelor, masters and PhD thesis on relevant subjects, available in libraries of the different universities.

### ***Aims and significances of the research***

In the consciousness of the Indonesian youth the importance and distinct perception of Europe seems to have decreased in the last years. In youth cultural practices, the importance of the specifically European influence may thus seem marginal at first sight, but by taking a closer look one becomes aware of the significant role Europe and the colonial past still play, for example in the legal and economic system, but also in the life of young Muslims and in their expressions of Islam. Beside the colonial past and the mass media, many other influences shape the perception and youth cultural practices of Muslim students, such as exchange students from foreign countries who introduce foreign trends to the campus, as well as Indonesian students who return from exchange semesters to Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt, to European countries, Australia or rarely to the United States. Furthermore especially

the bigger Islamic student organisations active at UGM are affiliated to larger Islamic organisations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdatul Ulama (NU) which have connections to the Middle East as well as to the Euro-American West.

The construction of knowledge specifically about Europe seems to be an interesting topic, especially as the relationship towards Europe has changed and is not exclusive anymore; often Europe is not even perceived differently than America. In present days, young Indonesian Muslims face new forms of cultural hegemonies and deal with them in their own creative ways. New approaches have thus to be used to understand hybrid identities and youth cultural practices, that are not trapped in essentially colonial discourses and take the active and creative role of individuals into account.

What do identity constructions of Muslim youth reveal to us about the relationship between Indonesia, the Islamic Middle East and Europe today? According to Frederick, just by looking at conventional data, one is only able to tell relatively little about such things as Indonesian popular culture, popular views of national character, or Islam in everyday life (1982: 104). He further notes that pop cultural phenomena, such as youth cultural practices, illuminate in ways that other sources - especially quantitative ones - cannot, the nature of the enormous change Indonesia has undergone (1982: 128). Keeping this in mind I assume that especially young people, who shall be the focus of this research, play an important part in transformation processes. I agree with Nilan and Feixa that youth cultures can be seen as laboratories for hybrid cultures (2006: 2). To better understand processes of identity constructions is of substantial significance in the future relationship between Indonesia and Europe.

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