

BRC--6

Islam in Pekadjangan

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
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Dear Mr. Rogers:

The opinion is widely held that Islam in Indonesia is a thin layer applied over an ancient body of Hindu-Buddhist and animistic beliefs. It is further claimed that this thin layer is being steadily corroded by secularism and the acid of western and Americo-Hollywood influences. In his book on religion in Southeast Asia, Kenneth Landon says, "The Indonesians regard themselves as orthodox Sunnites of the school of Shafi'i, and yet Islam for most of them is a superficial thing."<sup>1</sup>

Landon's contention is highly debatable, even from the narrow scholastic view he takes in assessing the importance of a religion in national life. The opposite view can be held that Islam--the modern, more secularized Islam of the Egyptian reform--has experienced a significant development in Indonesia during this century and that this development can be expected to continue in the post-colonial period.

This letter is devoted to a village where Islam is not a "superficial thing." The place is Pekadjangan in Central Java. In this batik making center,<sup>2</sup> Islam is a vigorous force which penetrates every aspect of community life. As in my last letter on Pekadjangan and its economy, I offer my remarks as impressions gained during a short visit. They are obviously not a scholarly dissertation. I believe, however, that they raise several key problems for further analysis.

#### The Muhammadiyah

Islam in Pekadjangan village is represented entirely by the Muhammadiyah, an Islamic social and educational organization with a modern mind and endless energy.

The Muhammadiyah is one vehicle of the modernist movement in Islam. Modernism in Islam means many things, but it refers principally to the fundamentalist reform which began in the nineteenth century Middle East as a reaction to two characteristics which dominated Islam after its middle centuries: first, the dead weight of legalism and scholastic interpretation of the Prophet's message, and, second, the growth of multitudes of sects and orders which spread Islam to the far corners of the earth, but absorbed a variety of non-Islamic beliefs in doing so.

The modernist trend may be said to begin in the early decades of the last century with the Wahhabi movement in Arabia. The most influential exponents of modernism, as seen by Indonesians, were the great scholars Mohammad Abduh and Shaikh Rashid Rida, who taught and wrote at Al Azhar at the turn of this century. The Muhammadiyah movement originated in Mecca under the influence of the Wahhabi; its later development was greatly influenced by the Al Azhar modernists.

The essence of modernism is a return to the fundamental sources of Islamic belief, the Koran and Sunnah (the officially recognized sayings of the Prophet). The mass

of tradition, law, and custom which accumulated as official Islamic doctrine after the first centuries is rejected. Also rejected is the dominating role of the ulama, the non-organized body of Islamic scholars whose consensus of opinion (ijma) determined doctrine to an increasing degree after the tenth century. The ulama maintain a key role in the Islamic community as teachers and spiritual leaders, but their authority is limited. Modernism condemns saint worship and the rich fabric of mystery, ritual, and mysticism which had gradually been drawn over the original doctrine in its expansion across half the world. By this return to the simple fundamentals of Islamic monotheism, the way is cleared for a restatement of religious doctrine to meet modern problems. In some ways, the modern trend in Islam parallels the Protestant revolt against the Catholic Church. The person of Mohammad gains new importance, reason is extolled, and "the teachings of Mohammad are presented in terms of contemporary social ideals."<sup>3</sup>

A belief of Mohammad Abduh's lies at the heart of the modernist outlook: there can be no final contradiction between scientific knowledge and the message of the Prophet. This idea grew in fertile soil before the First World War, for at that time nearly the entire Islamic world was under colonial rule. The first stirrings of political nationalism could be felt from North Africa to Java, and it was clear from the beginning that this nationalism would find a part of its inspiration and sanction in western rationalism and science. It was fitting and in the spirit of Islam that modernism developed as both a spiritual and political outlook.

Modernism is not the possession of a sect or an organized body. It takes almost as many forms as it has influential exponents. In India, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan founded the famous college at Aligarh on modernist principles. Sayyid Amir Ali and, later, Sir Mohammad Iqbal captured the imagination of modern-minded Islamic youth with their writings. In other Islamic countries, scholars and schools promoted general as well as religious knowledge. At each turn, modernism meet the opposition of conservative leaders, particularly the powerful ulama; this continuing dispute does not necessitate a split in Islam, for there is general agreement in this catholic religion that Allah created, among other things, the possibility of a vigorous difference of opinion.

The modernist message was first circulated in Indonesia by returned hadjis.<sup>4</sup> According to Hamka, a remarkable, self-taught Indonesian scholar, news of the Wahhabi revival was brought from Mecca by pilgrims from the Minangkabau area of Sumatra. The struggle they began with conservative ulama continues to this day. The magazine al-Manar from Cairo began to circulate in Indonesia in the early days of this century, and its message was spread further by the Malay language magazines, al-Imam (Singapore, 1910) and al-Munir (Padang, 1911). In the following year Kiaji Hadji Dahlan established the Muhammadiyah in Djogjakarta. From that time, the Muhammadiyah has been a principal channel for modernist developments in Indonesia.

Thus Islam, which entered Indonesia via southern India in the thirteenth century, gained a fresh impetus and new perspective directly from the cradle of the faith in the Middle East. The Muhammadiyah propagates the reformed and revitalized Islam through nearly two thousand branches of a tightly disciplined organization. To attain its goals, the Muhammadiyah manages mosques, schools, and social activities throughout the islands. It is almost an important component of the Masjumi political party, to which it has given many top leaders.

The other day, "Papa" Hamka offered the opinion, "Our Muhammadiyah is the equivalent of your Y. M. C. A., isn't it?" During his trip to America, Hamka may have gained

an insight into the role of the Y. M. C. A. which has alluded me up to now. I believe the influence of the Muhammadiyah in a village such as Pekadjangan could be better compared to the role of the church in the pre-revolutionary communities of New England.

### Modern Islam in Pekadjangan

The Muhammadiyah began its work in Pekadjangan after the First World War, and its growth has paralleled that of the batik industry. The local Muhammadiyah chairman, Djazuli, claims that the organization's mission is far from accomplished, but he admits that some progress has been made. This is an understatement. The Muhammadiyah is completely responsible for religion, education, and social work in the village; its leaders dominate the village's political life.

Pakadjangan is a solidly Islamic town in a strongly Islamic section of Java. With a population of only 7000, it has three good sized mosques (one for women), and numerous small prayer houses. These have been built, maintained, and run by the Muhammadiyah. Over two hundred local residents have made the pilgrimage to Mecca, an indication of both the piety and wealth of Pakadjangan.

There are no government schools in the village. The mosques and schools are said to be financed entirely by money from the local Muhammadiyah and an annual contribution of 15 per cent of the profit of the local batik cooperative. I heard pride expressed that the village has never asked for the government funds available to mosques and religious schools. The Muhammadiyah runs the two grammar schools and one middle school and is hoping to build a high school soon on the site of an old cemetery. Its youth organization is managing the anti-illiteracy campaign, and leaders claim a literacy rate of sixty per cent, a remarkable figure I would accept as at least approximately accurate.

The curriculum in the three Islamic schools, which is determined in Muhammadiyah headquarters in Djogjakarta, is "modern"; religion is taught as a separate subject and courses are given in the subjects you would find in an American junior high school, such as biology, history, geography, and arithmetic. The students--who are not segregated by sex--learn the Indonesian, Javanese, English, and Arabic languages. This is in contrast to the strictly religious education provided by Islamic schools in more conservative areas.

I asked the principal of the middle school, a dynamic young man named Wasil, why a religious school concentrated so much on general knowledge. He answered that the glory of God is seen in everything created by God. Furthermore, the Koran, which contains the word of God, commands us to study the world in all its aspects. Its initial command is that we learn to read; we must also learn about science, history, other countries, and other religions. While we talked in his office, I noticed a number of signs in various languages hung on the wall: "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again"; "Veni, Vidi, Vici"; "Never say die"; and "Experience is the best teacher." Almost immediately he proposed that I give his students the experience of hearing an American talk about America. I promised to lecture the next morning.

The next day the student body gathered in the meeting hall, in back the boys in western clothes and in front the girls wearing sarongs and the white head scarf which is the sign of Islam for Indonesian women. The chattering died down, and Wasil began to introduce me. One of the teachers interrupted with a pun, and the class roared with laughter. Wasil laughed too, then continued, "Today you have

the rare opportunity of listening to a visitor from a foreign country. You all think you know about America from the movies (laughs), but today you have a chance to get real information. When Mr. Compton finishes, ask him all the questions you can think of. As citizens of a new country, we must learn about the world outside. We cannot remain STUPID. We have to keep on studying when we think we can't study any more. We have to work, work, work to attain our goals. We do this as a service to our country, to our religion, and to ourselves."

I got up and talked for half an hour in somewhat less eloquent Indonesian, then asked my ten to fourteen year old audience for questions. "Tell us about prejudice against the negroes in America." "Where should I go to study technology in America?" "Tell us about religion in America and Santa Claus." "What are the relations between private and governmental schools?" After thirty minutes, the class joker put the final question, "Do you have a nice younger sister I can write to?" The question period ended with laughs when I told him my only sister was married. But Wasil was swept away by the idea of correspondence. "This is a wonderful idea. Quick. Write down the names of ten or fifteen young people in America. We can exchange letters, improve our English, and learn about America, can't we, class?"

My preconceptions of an Islamic school had been dead wrong. Wasil called his students, "Saudara, Saudara," a term of equality. The informality of student-teacher relations was in sharp contrast to the formality of the Dutch patterned national university in Djakarta. Students and teachers alike were filled with endless curiosity about American television, movies, government, religion, education, race relations, and customs. The focus of many questions seemed to be, "How does this information relate to Indonesia's future development?" National and world consciousness were both surprisingly strong.

That night I had a chance to see another part of the educational system in action. Every week the Muhammadiyah holds a general membership meeting, nominally for religious instruction. According to my friend Ibrahim, the meeting is just as often devoted to world affairs or technical information, so that the meetings also serve as a course in adult education. The school meeting hall was crammed at eight o'clock, men and women separated by a purple curtain. Along one side of the room, the grizzled old members of the Muhammadiyah managing board sat at a long table. I had been asked to talk again, this time about education in general, with the warning that I'd better make it good because Wasil was reportedly using my visit to awaken some of the old Muhammadiyah leaders to the importance of western education. He was also said to be after more money for the underpaid teachers. The meeting was run with an iron hand by Abdul Fatah, a square-set young man of about thirty.

Abdul Fatah started his introduction as if he expected the audience to misunderstand the presence of a westerner in their midst. He told them outright that my visit was important and that they had better listen, even if they were not used to foreigners in Pekadjangan. The room was silent as I talked about government and education in America. Interest heightened and the room buzzed as I went on to school finances, educational foundations, and scholarships supported by the interest on investments: "Ah!" "So." "Eh, that's good." The question period was as lively as in the morning. Again the questions were all from the males, "What about teachers' education and qualifications in American elementary schools?" "What is the position of the negro?" "How are conditions in Mexico? Who owns the oil?" "Are churches supported by the government in America?" "How about the progress of Islam there?" And, "What are your impressions of students in Djakarta?" The final question, "What are your impressions of the schools in Pekadjangan, the teachers' low salaries, qualifications, etc.?" The chairman sensed trouble and broke in before I could answer, "The question period is now over."

The meeting continued as three university students told of their experiences in the last year. An economics student began, "Science is the key to the future. It will bring wealth and a perfect society." He went on to generalize about science and Indonesian national development, drawing in quotations from English and Dutch, seemingly at every opportunity. He stumbled a bit, then ended with feeling, "So we must struggle to develop ourselves. Otherwise our country will never cease to suffer at the hands of the Chinese businessmen."

After the last student had spoken of his tribulations at the School of Engineering in Djogjakarta, Wasil rose and gave a brilliant speech on education. He ended with an announcement, "You have heard how our students have suffered, yes SUFFERED, to reach their educational goals. We must never forget this. We all want our children to have college educations, don't we? But that isn't possible. Some of them can't make the grade. I have the great joy of telling you that our children can continue their education and become valuable citizens. I have the pleasure of announcing a government examination for two types of scholarships. One is for Islamic teachers, and the other for Islamic judges. The students who complete their course of study will become government employees, either in religious schools or religious courts. Islamic judges! Yes, modern ulama. I hope to see many of our children take the examination for these scholarships and carry on their education in the finest tradition of Islam." The meeting ended with a prayer.

I wondered immediately who Pekadjangan's Muhammadiyah leaders were. Unfortunately, I had no time or opportunity for a systematic investigation, but I found much confirmation of Professor Wertheim's contention that the Muhammadiyah, with its zest for modern education and rationalistic thinking, is an organization of the middle class. The Pekadjangan Muhammadiyah leaders I met were all batik enterprisers themselves or from the families of batik enterprisers. The lurah, or village chief, is head of one of the clans of batik makers. Thus, the three dominant decision making groups in the village--the village government, the Muhammadiyah, and the batik cooperative--are in reality one group. Through control of these three organizations, the village leaders make decisions which affect religion, education, charity, wages, and almost every aspect of life in Pekadjangan.

I found members of the Muhammadiyah-employer group interested in a variety of things. With me, they seemed most eager to talk about, (1) business: prices, markets, and types of investment; (2) technological developments and material progress in America; (3) education and national development, and (4) the struggle between Islamic ethics and Communist materialism. Most of these conversations showed both old and young to be intensely curious about the outside world, and confident about Indonesia's future development. This struck me as a great contrast to the attitudes of many disillusioned students and government employees I had met in Djakarta.

The seventy year old lurah, Hadji Demiyati, shows a surprisingly modernized attitude. His grandson says that before the Muhammadiyah entered Pekadjangan, the lurah supported seven wives and owned considerable land in neighboring villages. The Muhammadiyah informed him that four wives is an absolute limit in Islam, so three young women were quickly cut off the family roll by divorce. With some disgust he told me that the remnants of animistic worship can still be found in the village, but that the Muhammadiyah had done a fairly thorough job bringing the essentials of Islam and modern learning into village life. He hopes that the Muhammadiyah will spread to neighboring villages and wipe out animism and ignorance there too. I asked him how he accounted for Pekadjangan's prosperity, when compared with nearby villages which also make and trade batik. Without hesitation he attributed material progress to the religious and educational program of the Muhammadiyah. Then in a

businesslike way, the lurah pinned me down on passenger fares to America and the cost of board, room, and daily living for students. Later, his grandson told me that he had asked the lurah to finance his education in America, and that the old man was giving the matter serious consideration. The lurah has evidently come a long way in his thinking since the First World War.

Needless to say, the hostile attitude I had expected to find was nowhere evident in Pekadjangan's upper class. One young student told me with a broad smile that he had killed four Dutchmen during the revolution, illustrating his comment with a thrusting motion of his hands, as if jabbing with a bamboo spear. He went on to say that the Chinese in the Pekalongan area had generally sided with the Dutch at that time, and so received the same treatment. He made another thrust. As long as I wasn't mistaken for a Dutchman, he claimed that I was safe in the village; "We're all very American-minded, you know." And so they are. Young boys read the USIS propaganda magazine for its technical articles, most of the men say they want to visit America, and comments on the similarity of the American and Indonesian revolutions are common. In Pekadjangan, America means technical progress and material abundance; the village seems consciously American-minded in order to attain a goal about which there is no apparent disagreement: a strong nation and an Islamic society.

Biographies of either this spear-thrusting boy or the old lurah would go right to the heart of Indonesia's history of the last thirty years. A very useful analysis of Islam, nationalism, or a hundred other topics could be made by investigating the actions and attitudes of the little known people who have actually been making the history.

Modern Islam in Pekadjangan is a simple faith. It is elastic enough to admit of American-mindedness and extreme nationalism, so long as these do not destroy the traditional relationships between man and God, men and women, and religion and society. If there are basic contradictions between American materialism and Islam, Wasil believes that American techniques can be learned without succumbing to the evils of movies,<sup>5</sup> sex-consciousness, monogamy and the resulting prostitution, dancing, and secularism. He admits that some of the young people are lax in their religion, but attributes this to their schooling in the big cities. He claims that Islam is not losing ground in Pekadjangan. He sees no reason why Islam cannot thrive in a modern state; in fact, a correct understanding of Islam can only lead to progress.

A related attitude was shown by one of the young men of the village when I asked him what kind of a mosque he would design if he were an architect. He would use the most modern functional design from the west, adapted to Java's climate with large windows and overhanging eaves. He sees no reason to use an Arab style: "Anything created by a Moslem is Islamic."

I sensed three strong attitudes of resentment or fear among the upper class families in Pekadjangan. The first and most vigorous of these is of course directed toward the Dutch. If the Dutch achieved material results during their rule--such as irrigation works--it was only for their own profit, the argument runs. One of the greatest Dutch crimes was supposedly opposition to Islam and support for Christianity. A second sore point is the still powerful position of the Chinese in Indonesia's economy. This resentment seems to smolder without quite catching fire. The third object for general antipathy is Communism.

Communism is a foul word in upper-class Pekadjangan, posing as it does a threat to both business and religion. In conversation, Communism is combatted vigorously, even though it does not seem to exist in any form in Pekadjangan. The men discuss Communism as a national problem, and, as Masjumi Party members, they predict strong anti-Communist measures after the assumed Masjumi victory in the scheduled election.

There is general agreement that Pekadangan's batik workers will never be influenced by Communism, because of the solid work of the Muhammadiyah and the benevolent attitudes of their employers. As I mentioned in my last letter, the only labor organization in the village is a component of the Masjumi Party, which is represented in Pekadangan by the employers.

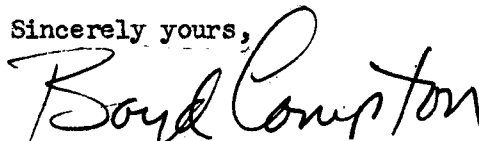
The most zealous anti-Communist I met claims to have read Gravchenko's I Chose Freedom several times; he swears that he will translate it into Indonesian when he has time. He advocates the use of widespread anti-Communist propaganda by Islamic organizations and the training of special propaganda cadres to fight fire with fire. Vigorous steps must be taken now by Indonesian Moslems, because he believes that much of the wealth of Chinese community is ready to support the Communist movement.

A hint of the combined influences which are shaping thoughts and values in Pekalongan can be gained sitting in the living room of an employer's house and just looking around. The house is large and modern, built in the Dutch-tropical style. The radio is blaring out American swing records, perhaps one of the new semi-westerns that are so popular in Indonesia; in a minute, the broadcast of national news in Indonesian will begin. Fifteen minutes later, a young lady with a velvet Javanese voice may announce selections of traditional gamelan music; she will speak in Javanese. Near the radio hangs an Arabian carpet; it pictures an Arab on horseback abducting a beautiful young lady from a desert tent. Another carpet shows an American cowboy throwing a steer. These two carpets are tourist treasures from the Mecca pilgrimage. The Javanese servant comes in to serve coffee; sometimes she remembers to keep her head lower than her master's, as is the ancient Javanese custom. The coffee cups, in fact almost all the household implements, have been bought from Chinese traders in Pekalongan. Through the door, batik sarongs can be seen drying in the shade. One of the family admits that the colors are "Chinese." She prefers the native browns, blues, and whites, but the "Chinese" bright pinks and greens sell better. On the wall, a strange framed picture--cut from a movie magazine or advertisement--of a good looking blonde smoking a cigarette with obvious satisfaction. On the opposite wall are seen idealized portraits of the wives of the President and Vice President. It is time for noon prayers, so my hosts excuse themselves. After lunch, they will take their afternoon rest, for "it's an old Javanese custom"; they will fall asleep to the steady "click-click-click" of the hand looms in back of the house and the hum of conversation from the batik workers, who "are just part of the family," but go on working just the same.

So the things you see and hear in Pekadangan represent influences from ancient Java, revolutionary Indonesia, America, Holland, China, and Arabia. These influences are mixing and brewing in a village society which quite confidently interprets the world in terms of its Islamic religion and textile business.

The leaders of this society are businessmen and Moslems with a modern outlook, who hold on to useful or deep rooted attitudes from the past. Pekadangan is an unusual village which has opened its door to the modern world. In doing so, it has allowed a process of social and cultural change to start which will continue for many years. If the future is going to present problems, the leaders of Pakadangan are also confident that it will bring them full literacy, good business, a harmonious social order based on Islam--and perhaps even television.

Sincerely yours,

  
Boyd Compton

Notes

1. Kenneth Landon, Southeast Asia, Crossroad of Religions (Chicago, 1949), p. 163. This book contains much valuable information, but I feel that Landon's attitude on Islam in Indonesia is far from sympathetic. I must admit that many Indonesian Moslems agree that Islam's development here is not deep, but few would join with him in attributing the character of modern Islam to Christian influences.
2. My last letter, BRC-5, discussed the making of batik in Pekadjangan. It's the material for the sarongs worn by several Hollywood actresses and many millions of Indonesians.
3. H. A. R. Gibb, Mohammedanism, an Historical Survey (London, 1950), p. 183. Gibb uses this phrase to describe the work of Sayyid Amir Ali.
4. The hadj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, is one of the five obligations of those Moslems who can afford it. The other four are the declaration of faith, the five daily prayers, alms giving, and fasting in the month of Ramadan.
5. A village near Pakadjangan recently closed down the local movie, claiming that it conflicted with customary law and the teachings of Islam. Pekadjangan has no movie, but the young people can see Hollywood, Malayan, or Philippine pictures in nearby Pekalongan. I heard no one speak against movies in general, but many of the older people are dead set against Hollywood movies with their high content of sex and crime.

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