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Shadow Puppet Theatre and Islam in Indonesia

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Indonesia
MATTHEW ISAAC COHEN

Indonesia, with a population of more than 200 million, of which perhaps 80 percent is Muslim, is frequently portrayed in popular press as 'the world's largest Islamic nation.' Typically, this statement is then immediately qualified. But, portrayals often continue, 'the Islam practised by Indonesians is different than that practised in the countries of the Middle East and Near East. It is more tempered or syncretic, less dogmatic, doctrinal, or fundamentalist. If proof of this more 'relaxed' attitude to the strict observance of Islam is offered, more often than not it is not through what Indonesian scholars of Islamic law have written (which tends to be rather conservative) nor by attention figures at Friday mosque services or the number of women who are wearing jilbab head covers (both of which are escalating at remarkable rates). Rather, commentators characteristically turn to the continuing popularity of pre-Islamic cultural forms in contemporary Indonesia – Java's celebrated shadow puppet theatre or wayang, with its stories based on the characters and situations of the individual epics of the Mahabharata and Ramayana, above all.

The fact that many of the people who live in Java (which contains nearly half of Indonesia's population) enjoy watching the adventures of Arjuna and Gathotkaca enacted as theatre is taken as incontrovertible evidence that Indonesians, as a people, are somehow 'less Islamic' than other member-peoples of the Islamic world community. This view is not limited to reporters, but pervades the discourse of anthropology.

Word Keeler, a renowned scholar of Javanese culture and language, has written that 'the message of Islamic law has written (which tends to be rather conservative) nor by attendance figures at Friday mosque services or the number of women who are wearing jilbab head covers (both of which are escalating at remarkable rates). Rather, commentators characteristically turn to the continuing popularity of pre-Islamic cultural forms in contemporary Indonesia – Java's celebrated shadow puppet theatre or wayang, with its stories based on the characters and situations of the individual epics of the Mahabharata and Ramayana, above all.

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