Connecting to the Modern

Repackaging Sufism in Urban Indonesia

A brochure for a newly upgraded adult Islamic studies centre, Padepokan Thaha, in central Jakarta’s swank Senopati district appealed to its anticipated clientele in 2005 by imagistically speaking in their voice, revealing the likely concerns that the centre could address. Reading the brochure, we listen in, as it were, on the kinds of ruminations that have led prospective students to pick up the brochure. “What’s wrong with me?” The brochure’s character frets. “I pray five times a day with real sincerity, I read all kinds of things about how to find spiritual gratification in prayer…but I still have trouble getting into that deep, focused feeling (khayyuk)… I want to enjoy life [even] in the midst of social conditions that are wracked by crises, I want to be able to be happy under all conditions.” As we read on, we find that the prospective students are the sort of people who actually have a good deal of material security and strong bases for social respect as well. Thus the brochure’s hypothetical reader confesses that his (or her) worries come “despite my everyday needs being fulfilled.” “I have a high level of education… and I’m also respected in society.” These are the kinds of people who ought to be happy and secure if any good Muslim could. So what’s missing? What’s missing, according to the brochure, is nothing less than the mystical experience of God’s presence, which is accessible with the assistance of Padepokan Thaha. Padepokan Thaha offers that assistance through its Programme for Guidance of the Self towards “Tawajjuh” (“Program Pembinasaan Diri Menuju Tawajjuh”). “Tawajjuh,” the brochure explains, is “coming face to face with [one’s] True Self” and “knowing the Creator” through ma’rifatullah (the highest stage of esoteric spiritual knowing in this rendering of Islam’s Sufi heritage). Initiation into the relevant spiritual practices is provided by the spiritual director of the foundation, KH Rachmat Hidayat, who also offers regular weekly classes at the centre on themes from the Quran and Hadith, such as might be found in many other well-appointed and formalized city pengajian (religious instruction classes). Kyai Rachmat himself has initiation from a Sufi master whose spiritual genealogy (silsilah) reaches back through the legendary Javanese Muslim saint Sunan Kudus, to the Prophet Muhammad via his nephew Ali.

We can see from this that Padepokan Thaha is catering for Jakarta urbanites’ niggling spiritual hunger by renovating what was once thought to be a dying remnant of rural, peasant society: Sufism (tasawwuf). That is, Padepokan Thaha offers (among other things) tutelage in esoteric practices that have been carried by Sufi orders (I. tarekat; Ar., tariqa) and in the metaphysics associated with the mystical experiences that may unfold from those practices. However, Kyai Rachmat denies that he himself is affiliated with a tariqa and both he and the directors of the foundation that runs Padepokan Thaha vigorously reject any idea that his teaching activities constitute a tariqa. Rather, as the foundation’s full name indicates, it is styled as a majelis ta’lim, an Islam study group. This addresses the phobia many Muslim modernists (that is, in Indonesia, people aligned culturally or organizationally with the Muhammadiyah and similar organizations) have of the supposedly archaic and authoritarian tariqa.

Contrary to the common view that Sufism is somehow incompatible with “the modern,” emerging new forms of Sufism signify the creative adaptation of Islam to the religious sensibilities and social demands of modern life. This article focuses on the Padepokan Thaha, a thriving Islamic studies centre in Indonesia, whose integration of esoteric spiritual knowledge with modern-style education suits the modern sensibilities of affluent and educated Muslim cosmopolitans in Indonesia.}

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Catering to urban professionals

Indeed as an institution Padepokan Thaha is a thoroughly modern operation. It is a formally constituted charitable foundation, with officers charged with specific administrative duties, and proper accounting for its funds. The approach to teaching is also well suited to the interests and preferred learning styles of well-educated, globally “connected” urbanites. This is signalled in the brochure we have already sampled: the Tawajjuh Programme is delivered by “teachers and facilitators” (pengajar and fasilitator). Kiai Rachmat is simply listed as the first of these, although his primacy and special role is acknowledged in his title “Pengasuh” (lit., one charged with the care of others). Significantly, he is not identified by the terms shaykh or murshid, which are more resonant of the authority and hierarchy in the old-time tariqa.

The modern feel of this majelis ta’lim is also evident in the brochure’s description of the Tawajjuh Programme’s instructional methods (metode), namely: “discussion/dialogue (sharing)” (diskusi/dialog [sharing]), “lecture” (kuliah), and practice (pengamalan). “Practice” is briefly explained as performing certain devotional rituals (ibadat), making clear the programme is built on a firm religious base, but also alluding to notions of self-development and learning through one’s own experience that are central to modern-style general education. To make it clear to prospective participants that the discussions and lectures will use best-practice, university-style educational methods, the brochure also explains that the facilitator and participants will be “on the same level” (sejajar) in “discussions,” and after lectures there will be a question and answer period. It is hardly coincidental that so many English language loan words are used in the brochure: they signify Padepokan Thaha’s positive engagement with an international world of business, management and teaching practices, such as patrons employ in their professional lives.

The efforts of Padepokan Thaha’s directors to accommodate modern urban life-styles and the interests of specifically cosmopolitan urbanites is evident in the range of its programmes, their regular scheduling to accommodate the leisure-time planning of busy urbanites, and the content of the programmes. Monthly schedules are printed showing the topic, times (weekday evenings), and session leaders for its five regular programmes, which, in addition to the Tawajjuh Programme (a residential course done only once by any given student), include “Routin” cover core skills and topics common to other majelis ta’lim, albeit with some differences in choices of texts and commentary, the book and film discussion nights cater to a distinctively broad range of “spiritual” interests of Padepokan Thaha’s cosmopolitan clientele. This is evident from book club choices like Achmad Chodjim’s best-selling Conquest of Mind, professional film choices like “Little Buddha” and “The Passion” also show that Padepokan Thaha’s programme planners are trying to help students make sense of popular culture representations of other religions in a way that is consistent with the universalism of Kiai Rachmat’s Unity of Being (wahdat al wujud) metaphysics.2
To judge from the packed audience hall at Padepokan Thaha and the traffic jams caused in the street front by patrons’ late-model sedans and four-wheel-drives on evenings when the regular pengajians and special lectures are on, this new-style centre for Sufi studies has indeed accurately identified a social need and suitably catered for it. The centre is flourishing. Other “Padepokan” functioning under the guidance of Kiai Rachmat and with the same institutional structure and core programmes have also opened elsewhere in Jakarta (Padepokan Esa in Bintaro) and in other parts of Indonesia (in Bogor, Bandung, Batam, Pekan Baru, Surabaya, and Bali). Padepokan Thaha directors put the number of people in Jakarta who regularly attend functions at around 4,000.

Adaptations to modern life

The “Padepokan” associated with Kiai Rachmat are not unusual in teaching some form of Sufism in upmarket quarters of the major Indonesian cities, except, perhaps, in offering initiations through the same city-based charitable foundation that supports Islamic learning in an organizationally formalized setting. Most institutionally modern foundations and businesses offering tafsawuf studies as part of a broader programme of Islamic studies for adults in Indonesia do not have practicalities, much less initiations; but they nonetheless commonly acknowledge the value of cultivating deep devotional feeling in one’s prayers and the virtues of ethical reflection associated with various Sufi disciplines. Such modern Islamic study providers may also help their students locate appropriate individual instructors and workshops, and some have offered excursions to rural tarekat with introductions to spiritual directors there. There are also independent groups with more of a practice orientation to Sufism. The variety and articulation of new institutions through which middle-class and elite Indonesian urbanites are now accessing “Sufi” teachings is described in my chapter in the forthcoming volume Sufism and the “Modern” in Islam.3

The other case studies in that volume (which span the Muslim world from Africa to Asia, as well as Muslim migrant communities and universalist movements in Western societies) provide us with a useful cross-cultural perspective on contemporary adaptations of Sufism in Indonesia. Viewed in this broader context, it appears that Indonesian Muslims are hardly alone in working changes in the tariqa. Rather, we can see the many new forms Sufism is taking there as part of a global panorama of creative adaptation of Islam to the religious sensibilities and social demands of modern life.

Surveying this global panorama, it is evident that in the global house-cleaning and rebuilding of contemporary Islam that we have witnessed over the twentieth century, Sufism has not been thrown out; instead, like other strands of the Islamic heritage, it has been selectively recon-figured. In Egypt and West Africa, Muslims enthusiastically patronize conventional tariqa but turn them to novel social purposes like interest cleaning and rebuilding of contemporary Islam that we have witnessed over the twentieth century, Sufism has not been thrown out; instead, like other strands of the Islamic heritage, it has been selectively recon-figured. 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