A Visit to Jakarta’s Bayt al-Qur’an

Nearly one hundred years ago the Dutch scholar C. Snouck Hurgronje, writing in the Netherlands Indies, published his article ‘Islam and phonography’ in which he described co-occurrences of recording suras of the Qur’an made available for the phonograph.¹ At the time, this innovation caused both interest and debate among Muslim scholars as to whether the use of this medium was Islamic, although it soon became accepted. The phonograph was later succeeded by the audiocassette. Now there are many interactive products available for the computer-literate Muslim – from various indexed and hyper-linked Qur’ans accessible through the internet, to CD-ROM packages designed for users who wish to learn to recite the Qur’an at home. Perhaps the most astounding aspect of the CD-ROM is its capacity to join the visual and aural experiences of the Qur’an. Yet, like its bakelite predecessor, the CD-ROM has evoked a modern debate over the application of such technology and the Islamic qualifications of its creators.²

In Jakarta today, one is made aware of modern technologies (i.e. aural and visual). In terms of access to them, however, there exists a dividing line between the wealthy and the poor – in much the same way as the elevated toll roads of Jakarta divide the elite suburbs with their satellite dishes, from the crowded slums and their miners. In the streets and exurbs, as in most other Muslim countries, recordings of the Qur’an made by famous readers in one of the approved recitations. Bookshops popular with the middle classes – like the ‘Gramedia’ and ‘Gunung Agung’ chains – regale their customers with the latest in interactive software replete with translations into Indonesian, hyper-linked suras and floating graphics. Not all of these programmes are assembled officially by the ulama, but are rather the creations of software designers and engineering students, some of whom are attached to particular ideological schools. In many ways these designers are repeating the process of interpretation and presentation performed by individual calligraphers, publishers and printers. Some are perhaps unconsciously applying their own regional or supra-regional Islamic imagery to the margins of any given medium, for it is in the margins of the Qur’an that a freedom to decorate is granted, whilst the text itself remains eternal and immutable. This is also relevant for the internet where presentation is often equated with accessibility. A well-designed interactive product complete with evocative images will always generate more visual interest than a bare text.

Museum and presentation

It is this marginal experimentation that I observed most recently whilst being shown through another relatively recent aspect of modernity in Indonesia: the Islamic museum, or more particularly the Bayt al-Qur’an of Jakarta’s Taman Mini.³ Here one walks, as it were, from the margins of the Qur’an into the margins of the Islamic world and on to what some Muslims would find marginally Islamic. I say this not to be glib, but rather to raise some old questions. Can a cultural bias be applied to the presentation of Islam and in what sense is something Islamic? The Bayt al-Qur’an raises both questions.

The visitor to the Bayt al-Qur’an is at first struck by the new and spacious building at the outskirts of Taman Mini. After passing copies of the Qur’an displayed glass cases and paying a modest fee, one enters the first hall of the main exhibition. Here one encounters various framed pages of the masu’il (the text itself, each decorated in its margins in a style intended to represent the particular provincial culture of the artist. Were all these pages to be compiled – and indeed there were enough – then perhaps we would be confronted by a peculiarly Indonesian Qur’an whose assembly mirrored that of the Prophet’s (Bhineka tunggal ika). Yet this national unity is, or perhaps was, underwritten by a political ideology and not the majority faith of its inhabitants. Until recently in Indonesia, the various cultures were only allowed to express their differences in the supposedly ‘Islamic’ nation- and music. The political text of Pancasila⁴ remains immutable and untranslatable and permeated every aspect of New Order Indonesia.

The second hall of the Bayt al-Qur’an also contains many images representative of a pride in the historical Islamization of the archipelago. If the first hall was concerned with rendering the universal Indonesian, then the second is about proving the historical credentials of that claim. There are thus images and models of the court mosques of Demak, Banten, Yogjakarta, and Solo, as well as smaller surau (mosques) from the eastern archipelago. Clearly this is not just a museum of texts as its name would indicate. These are images of mosques whose function is certainly part of Islamic practice and whose form need not follow the established patterns of the Islamic ‘centre’. Rather, they are, uniquely, the ancient architectural styles of the archipelago.

The third hall was for me the key to the entire exhibit, displaying a collection of Qur’ans and some of the core texts of the Islamic sciences used throughout the Muslim world – from exegeses to grammatical treatises. Some are lithographed, others copied by hand on European paper or locally-manufactured bark paper. Few are dated. Here the irredeemable beauty of the Arabic script is on display and the undeniable calligraphic unity of the umma is reinforced. In the background, yet another CD-ROM emits a recitation that would incite a remarkably similar reaction in Muslims throughout the world. In this sense the third hall is not the preserve of any one culture but displays the universality of Islam as defined by its revered book and the sciences it has created.

What is Islamic here?

It is thus in the subsequent displays that the coherence of Islamic practice breaks down. Here are fabrics (batik and ikat) and cultural artefacts – from ceremonial daggers and Acehnese eggshells to obsequies whose function is inconceivable in the prelude to the display. In some respects the foreign viewer is reminded of Buruj – the magical beast said to have carried Muhammad on his night journey: our guide did indeed remark that this was the case. However, she added that some visitors had complained about the inclusion of such figures and also stated that there was no mention of this journey in the Qur’an. Why should such objects be displayed in the home of the Qur’an? In their wisdom, the curators have placed their Buruj – even if they were not intended to represent Buruj among the texts and images marshalled to represent their imagined umma.

Notes

2. Michael Laffan is a doctoral candidate at the School of Asian Studies, University of Sydney and a tutor at the Faculty of Asian Studies, Australian National University. E-mail: mlaффan@unsw.edu.au
4. The five principles of the Indonesian state as propagated by Sukarno: Belief in one God, National Unity, Social Justice, Popular Sovereignty through Consensus, and Just and Civilized Humanism.

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President Bill Clinton and former Minister of Religious Affairs Tarmizi Taher observing at the Mushaf Al Quran.