The Sacred Geography of an Indonesian Islamic Modernity

In the centre of Tebu Ireng, Indonesia’s most famous Islamic boarding school, is a mosque-graveyard complex which includes the grave of Hashim Ashari, the founder of Tebu Ireng who is remembered and revered as both a Sufi master and an Indonesian national hero. Around this physical and spiritual centre, a number of new spaces (schools, a telecommuni- cations office, computer labs, and banks) have emerged. It is argued here that the very landscape of Tebu Ireng spatializes the kinds of relationships that the school’s leaders argue that Muslims should have with the State, secular science, and the global market place.

In East Java, the sacred geography of a pesantren (Islamic boarding school) serves as a model for how faith and modernity should be ordered in the lives of Indonesian Muslims. Pesantren Tebu Ireng has been for many Indonesian traditionalists Muslims a model for how to engage modernization through edu- cation. In addition to being a popular boarding school for students from throughout Indonesia, it is also a popular pilgrimage desti- nation (over 2000 pilgrims each month). As an institution that has undergone a transforma- tion from being a traditional centre of Islamic learning, famous for training ulema, to a reli- gious boarding school primarily for junior high and high school students, Tebu Ireng’s landscape reflects a tension between main- taining tradition and modernizing.

A balanced centre
The mosque and the mahal (graveyard) at the centre of Tebu Ireng form the most sacred space. The landscape proudly pro- claims that both normative piety (as exemplified by the mosque) and mysticism (as ex- emplified by the graveyard and the activi- ties which take place there) must be part of modern life and Indonesian statehood, and it demands that they be placed firmly at the centre.

The Tebu Ireng mosque is of the distinctive Javanese three-tiered pagoda roof style. The three tiers are said to symbolize Shahadah, Tawhid, and Hakikat (Law, Mysticism, and Truth). At the entrance to this mosque stands a large drum (bedug) used to call the faithful to prayer. Local lore holds that when Hashim Ashari built this mosque he said that, as long as it stood, students (santri) would find knowledge at the edge of bayan (blessing/power) at Tebu Ireng. Because of the special nature of the mosque, some people have been antagonis- tic towards and the building of additional mos- ques for the pesantren’s use.

In addition to communal worship, the mosque is used for the teaching of classical Is- lamic texts (nqiqi) including those of al-Ghaz- ali. Besides regular lessons on these texts, some of the leaders hold special sessions dur- ing school breaks and the Ramadan. These special sessions are open to pilgrims and reg- ular students alike and start after salatiyak, the last prayers of the day, and continue for several hours, sometimes until midnight.

To the west of the mosque is the graveyard of Hashim Ashari and his family members. Sa- cred geography places this graveyard be- tween the believers and Mecca when they pray. Because the dead are buried facing to- ward Mecca, this geographical layout (broadly suggests that the great kyai (elites) buried there is still leading the com- munity in prayer. In Java, this pattern is rare for most pesantren leaders, but is common for great saints including the Wallongsongo (the legendary nine saints who founded Islam in Java). The graveyard is an important source of bayan as it can linger in the body and is transmitted to the area around the tomb. Pil- grims will take a copy of the Qur’an that has been at the graves, absorbing bayan, and leave a re- ply to the mosque.

The mosque-graveyard complex forms the physi- cal and symbolic centre of the pesantren. This com- plex is, then, representa- tive of traditional Jawa- nese Islamic piety. It re- flects three dimensions of piety: Shahadah, scholarship, and mysticism. This landscape demonstrates that these three dimensions must be balanced, that one cannot exist without the other. The leaders of Tebu Ireng reject the idea that it is possible to transcend Shahadah by mystical prac- tice and therefore no longer be required to up- hold it. They also reject the claim that Sufism must be abandoned in order for Muslims to modernize. Finally, they withdraw the idea that the mosque is used for the teaching of classical Is- lamic texts.

To the west of the main complex are the grounds of Tebu Ireng (graveyard) on the three-tiered pagoda roof style. The three tiers are said to symbolize Shahadah, Tawhid, and Hakikat (Law, Mysticism, and Truth). It is argued here that the very landscape of Tebu Ireng spatializes the kinds of relationships that the school’s leaders argue that Muslims should have with the State, secular science, and the global market place.

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