

Inaugural Lecture

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Transformations of Heterodoxy

On 21 November 2000, Martin van Bruinessen, ISIM Chair at Utrecht University, delivered his inaugural lecture entitled 'Muslims, Minorities and Modernity: The Restructuring of Heterodoxy in the Middle East and Southeast Asia'. The lecture compared Alevism in Turkey with *kebatinan* in Indonesia, where adherents of heterodox folk belief and practice – rather than gradually shifting towards scripturalist, *shari'a*-oriented Islam – were transformed into distinct religious minorities deliberately distancing themselves from orthodox Islam. The following is composed of excerpts from the lecture.



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The related processes of urbanization, mass education and the rapid development of print and electronic media have completely changed the structures of authority and belief in the Muslim world. Among the believers, there appears to be a general trend away from various heterodox beliefs and practices and towards conformity with scripturalist Islam, although scriptural authority is contested. The authority of the *u-*

lama, the guardians of orthodoxy, is challenged by other categories of learned men (and women).

Some Muslim communities have rejected not only the authority of the *ulama* but orthodoxy as such, in the name of a deviant, esoteric interpretation of Islam. Alevism in Turkey and *kebatinan* mysticism in Java, Indonesia, represent two varieties of 'folk' Islam that, under the influence of political developments, reversed an earlier shift towards scripturalist Islam and defined a sharp boundary to separate themselves from it. Both have fought for recognition as distinct religious minorities on equal grounds with Sunni Islam. Both have been seen as potential allies against the rise of political Islam by the secular nationalist elites of their countries and have been praised as representing an authentic national tradition. At the same time, however, they both have been politically suspect because of their perceived predilection for the left and extreme left. Heterodoxy, after all, is always potentially subversive.

In the early 20th century, Java witnessed the appearance of the first *kebatinan* movements. Mystical teachers with a smaller or larger following had been a common phenomenon, but now several such followings were organized into formal associations that outlived their founders. They established rules for membership, regular meetings at set times, and standardized meditation exercises. Some movements established chapters in other towns and even villages, organized by a mystical bureaucracy that institutionalized itself. The teachings were – and this is another novelty – written;

several have their own sacred scripture. Reading and studying these texts became part of the practice of *kebatinan* adepts – something I like to think of as the scripturalization of *kebatinan*.

After independence, most *kebatinan* movements joined in a confederation that lobbied for official recognition with a status comparable to religion. In the context of the political struggle between the Muslim parties and the Communists and Nationalists, the boundaries separating *kebatinan* from Sunni Islam were sharpened, most *kebatinan* movements affiliating themselves with the Communist or Nationalist parties. The Islamic element in their belief system, which had always existed, was often deliberately played down.

The name Alevi is a blanket term for a variety of heterodox communities, formerly relatively isolated one from the other, that are found all over present-day Turkey. Islam has strongly marked their belief system, but they have distinctive rituals that are very different from those of Sunni Islam. A long history of oppression made Alevi identity a stigma that many wished to conceal. Some communities assimilated, at least formally, to Sunni Islam; most Alevi enthusiastically embraced Turkey's secularism that appeared to give them equal rights.

It was as recently as the late 1980s that there suddenly emerged a strong and successful movement to redefine, reconstruct and perhaps reinvent Alevism as a religious identity. This movement may be seen as a response to two developments that deeply affected the Alevi: the radical left, in which many Alevi had found a political home, was

destroyed after the military coup of 1980; and in an attempt to pre-empt radical Islam, the new regime embraced a conservative brand of Sunni Islam which it imposed – though unsuccessfully – even on Alevi citizens.

In response to this, a new type of organization emerged: the Alevi cultural association, spearheaded by intellectuals of Alevi background and financed by Alevi businessmen. It was these associations that reinvented Alevi ritual in the new urban context. The Alevi's traditional religious authorities, a caste of holy men whose status was inherited, were involved in the process but no longer in leading roles. Lay intellectuals published numerous books and articles defining what Alevism was and what Alevi believed, interpreting their rituals, developing something of an Alevi theology. From a largely orally transmitted folk religion, Alevism appears to be developing into a scripturalist version of itself, a distinctly modern phenomenon.

The cases of Alevism and *kebatinan* represent an interesting variation on the gradual but inexorable shift from folk Islam to scripturalist Islam predicted by, for instance, Gellner's well-known model of Muslim society. The emergence of a learned variety of the local tradition appears to be an alternative. In both cases, political developments were of crucial importance in the process. Under other circumstances, it may not have occurred. And even in establishing this alternative, the communities concerned had to engage scripturalist Islam and were to a large degree shaped by it. ◀