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ISLAM IN ASIA: PEOPLE, PRACTICES, TRADITIONS

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WEEK 5

Islam in Java: A powerful presence

When in Java, the most populous island in Indonesia, it is hard to forget that the majority of people there are Muslim. It is hard not to see the many mosques and *mushollas* (prayer rooms) interspersed between homes, shops and stores in villages and cities. It is hard not to hear the call to prayer emanating simultaneously from many mosques and mushollas through loudspeakers, conveniently giving one a sense of the time of day. It is hard not to notice women wearing headscarves in various colors and styles. It is hard not to touch a tunic at a store specializing in *busana Muslim* — Muslim fashion. It is hard not to internalize Arabic words that are sprinkled in spoken, everyday Indonesian (the national language), and spoken, everyday Javanese (a local language): “*Assalamualaikum!*” a friend calls out to announce his or her visit to your home. “*Walaikum salam!*” you respond. The scholar Anne Rasmussen was so impressed by the presence of Islam in the sonic atmosphere that she dedicated a whole chapter to it in her book “*Women, the Recited Qur’an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia*” (University of California Press, 2010).

Even though Islam permeates Javanese life, it is impossible not to be impressed by the way that the Javanese have retained the distinctiveness of their own culture. Islam is quite present in Javanese performing arts — the music, dance and theater of ethnic Javanese, which is the largest of hundreds of ethnic groups that live in Indonesia. In various capacities — including as performers, sponsors, audience members, directors of arts organizations, composers, choreographers and consumers — many Muslim Javanese support, maintain and develop many kinds of performing arts, keeping the arts alive and a part of present-day Javanese culture. Furthermore, performances are held for Muslim occasions, such as circumcisions and celebrations preceding or following the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Sometimes performances are held in explicitly Muslim spaces. I once attended a theater performance at an Islamic boarding school.

Islam infuses Javanese performing arts in other ways. In Malang, East Java, where I study dance and gamelan music (played on ensembles that consist mostly of gongs and keyed percussion instruments), lessons, rehearsals and performances are often scheduled so as not to conflict with the Muslim call to prayer at certain times of the day, particularly the call to prayer after sunset, at nightfall and before sunrise. If such an activity, including an all-night performance, is not finished, a brief break is usually taken during the call to prayer. Islam is also present in the activity of Muslim people performing, attending and organizing performances for secular events, such as Indonesian Independence Day (Aug. 17) celebrations. Many Javanese Muslims also participate as performers, audience members, organizers and in other ways for ceremonies and celebrations traditionally associated with local Javanese spiritual beliefs and practices, such as village purification ceremonies.

That Islam infuses Javanese performing arts, and Javanese society more generally, does not mean that all the people who live in Java are Muslim or that the Javanese Muslims themselves are homogeneous. People in Java subscribe to other religions, including forms of Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism. People of diverse ethnic groups, socioeconomic classes and sexual orientations — including those who identify as Muslim — also live in Java.

Furthermore, Muslims in Java approach Islam and live their lives as Muslims in different ways. For example, some fast during the month of Ramadan, while others do not. Many Javanese Muslims integrate into their understanding of Islam local Javanese spiritual beliefs and practices — beliefs that a vocal minority of Javanese Muslims view as heretical. For example, some performers who are Muslim believe that dancers, such as those who wear masks, may be entered by spirits who help them to dance more powerfully (see the accompanying photograph).

Given that Java is so diverse — and so densely populated — it is remarkable how well people get along, for the most part.

Java is not completely free from religious tension, conflict or violence. As one learns about Islam in Java, however, it is hard not to notice that Islam is a remarkably diverse faith and one that can manifest itself in many distinct ways.



The author poses in a masked dance costume from Malang, East Java. Photograph taken in Seattle by Mr. Sunardi on Sept. 29, 2011.