# Anthropology of Civilization: Personal Reflections on Anthropological Approach in the Study of Muslim Societies in Southeast Asia

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#### ABSTRACT

After pursuing a long academic career as an anthropologist, this article provides my (Mitsuo Nakamura's) personal academic reflection of how my anthropological approach differs from the Geertzian paradigm, why anthropology and Islamic studies should be bridged, and what implications of the conversation between Islamic studies, anthropology, and other social sciences are. By answering the above questions, this reflective article sheds new light on the relationship between anthropology and Islam and Muslim studies in Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia. The anthropological studies of Muslims in Southeast Asia that have been heavily influenced by Clifford Geertz through his work, The Religion of Java (1960), are engaged critically in this article. If Geertz and his students pay more attention to Little Tradition (local culture and practices) and avoid Great Tradition (e.g., religious concepts and teachings), my anthropological approach argues for the importance of incorporating Great Tradition, which is Islamic Studies in the case of Muslim studies in Southeast Asia, in the study of anthropology and vice versa.

Keywords: anthropology, Islamic studies, Geertz, Indonesia, Muslim, Southeast Asia

#### INTRODUCTION

Anthropology of Civilization, or more exactly anthropology of Islamic civilization in Southeast Asia, is what I have been pursuing for about 40 years since I started my career as anthropologist. I engaged in the study of the Muhammadiyah movement in Kotagede, Yogyakarta, 1970-72, for my PhD dissertation. Now I am impressed with the recent progress achieved by a number of institutes of Islamic higher education in Indonesia in enhancing

their teaching and research capacities by incorporating general sciences including social science and humanities.<sup>1</sup> In this reflective article, let me answer a guestion why am I interested in Indonesia, and why on Java? This is an often-asked question for me. In fact, many incidents and many encounters have brought me into Indonesian studies. During the early student days, I was moving from Hegelian philosophy to Marxism, then to American anthropology of cultural relativism. Meanwhile, I made acquaintance with a number of scholars from Indonesia: Pak. Selosoemardjan in Tokyo, Pak Sartono Kartodirdjo and Pak Koentjaraningrat et al. in Ithaca. Then, as a graduate student, I experienced an overwhelming influence of Clifford Geertz. I was deeply impressed by his work, The Religion of Java, with its thick description and neat analysis. It was really the model for any young anthropologists to follow at that time. However, I was not so satisfied with his work on social history of Javanese town, Modjokuto. For me, as a citizen of Japan where we find a long history of indigenous urbanization, Modjokuto's history of a few hundred years sounded too shallow to be taken up as a model for the study of "pre-industrial indigenous urbanization" - this was my academic interest before going into the field. So, after reading some historical research findings on Indonesian urbanism, I found "Kotagede" (or more exactly, Kuto Gede) in the work of Van Mook to have a much longer historical presence of urban community than Modjokuto. So, I decided to do "a social history of Central Javanese town," to compare it with Geertz's Modjokuto in East Java.

# MOVING FROM GEERTZ: BRIDGING ISLAMIC STUDIES AND ANTHROPOLOGY IN INDONESIA

Thus, I began my fieldwork in Kotagede to learn its social history. I had no intension of studying Islam at all in the beginning, not to speak of Muhammadiyah. Yet, in the course of fieldwork, something changed. For some time, I engaged in standard ethnographic inquiry, i.e. gathering official data and written documents, interviewing a number of key persons, and observing various events – rituals, cultural performances and religious and political meetings, etc. via the standard method of anthropological fieldwork since Malinowski, that is participant observation.<sup>2</sup> However, at about in the middle of my 18 months stay in the town, I experienced increasing realization that Islam had been a vital living force in various forms in the community since the time Mataram kingdom was born. I felt that Javanese civilization had been deeply imbued with Islam and indigenized it, and the

Muhammadiyah movement was its most recent manifestation. I came to be convinced that social history of the town of Kotagede could not be described and discussed without setting Islam and Muhammadiyah in it properly. This was, in fact, a tricky academic operation under Orde Baru, which forbade foreign as well as domestic researchers to deal with any SARA matters at all. So, I had to collect data on Muhammadiyah rather secretively even without making my assistants to realize my intension.

My experience in studying Muhammadiyah in Kotagede gradually made me critical of anthropology's role in Indonesian studies dominated by Geertzian paradigm. The problem with his trichotomy of *santri*, *abangan*, *priyayi*, was already well exposed and criticized by many. So, perhaps there needs no more comment from me. However, more serious was lack of proper civilizational approach in Geertzian anthropology, especially among his epigones.

In broad perspective, American anthropology of Geertz's generation was taking up a new task of studying civilizations or complex societies in place of primitive societies, which were fast disappearing after WII.<sup>3</sup> Then, there developed a framework for studying civilization or complex society, i.e. its division into Great Tradition vs. Little Tradition. With the help of other disciplines in area studies, anthropology was to play a coordinating role to integrate the achievements of those disciplines and produce a coherent, whole picture of the civilization under the study. However, in reality, anthropology often concentrated only on the latter, i.e. Little Tradition alone, at the expense of the former, Great Tradition. The task of understanding the whole was often left undone.

It was my perception that this bias in anthropology of civilization became prevalent and rather serious among American researchers of Muslim societies in Southeast Asia. In their framework of ethnography, i.e. observation and description of a certain local culture and society, often no adequate attention was paid on the position and significance of the Qur'an and the Hadith, which was the core of Islamic Great Tradition in the region subsuming the particular society under study. It was taken for granted that the Qur'an and the Hadith and a number of classical commentaries on them were irrelevant for ethnography despite frequent reference to them by local *ulama*, and sometimes even by ordinary people, in actual life. To take an example, in the above-mentioned monograph on Javanese religion, Geertz extensively touched upon the Islamic teachings especially in the chapters dealing with 'Santri Variant' of Javanese religion. However, he never quoted the Qur'an or the Hadith that had been quoted in the informant's statements. He just reported that "Informant quoted it" from the Qur'an or the Hadith without reporting the exact source or the content of the said quotation.<sup>4</sup>

I became critical of this approach as anthropological undertaking. To say the least, it was incomplete, imbalanced and inaccurate as the anthropologist's task of recording and reporting exactly what "natives say and what natives do" – a maxim of Malinowski for ethnographic fieldwork. Realizing this deficiency in Geertz's ethnography, I wanted to be faithful to the guidelines set by the founding fathers of modern anthropology.<sup>5</sup> In my PhD dissertation, I tried my best, to the limit of my linguistic ability then, to record and report the statements of informants including the quotations form the Qur'an and the Hadith as much as possible. Also, in tracing the development of Muhammadiyah movement from its very beginning in Kotagede during the 1910s until the early 1970s, efforts were made to utilize contemporaneous documents as much as possible and carefully examine the statements of key informants. In my dissertation, I described the development of Muhammdiyah as a phase in the process of ongoing Islamization in Java, in which increasingly large number of individuals are moving from the abangan outlook and life-style to the santri one in the mode of Muhammadiyah in the concomitant process of social, economic and political change. The dissertation was published in 1983.6

When I first published it, I did it with a full realization of serious limits contained in my work. The major shortcoming of my work was as follows: I had no language ability to follow the informant quotation from the Qur'an and the Hadith in Arabic. This limit was, however, not personal but rather institutional. For my generation of PhD candidates in anthropology, no Southeast Asian or Indonesian studies centers in the US provided language lessons in Arabic (or even in Jawi/Pegon for that matter) as part of their pre-field training. Rather, prevalent attitude at a number of centers for area studies was that the learning of the language of Great Tradition should rather be avoided lest it interfered the study on Little Tradition. For example, it was reported that a prominent professor of anthropology of South Asia gave such an admonition to his students: "There is no need to learn Sanskrit to do proper fieldwork in India. Just concentrate on folk tradition, or subculture of little people via vernacular language – it is enough for anthropology. Sanskrit will contaminate your perception."

After our field experience, Hisako and I had to make personal efforts to overcome this deficiency in the anthropology of Muslim societies in Indonesia. In fact, after Indonesia, we had a chance to stay for a rather long time at ANU in Canberra and got acquainted with Anthony Johns and his work there. We became increasingly aware that there was necessity to familiarize ourselves with the achievements of Islamic studies to do proper Indonesian studies. Pak Soebardi was also helpful to make us aware of the significance of traditional Islamic literature in the Malay Muslim world to understand their spiritual life. In fact, it was in the environment of ANU that I came across and impressed very much for the first time in my life by the poems, or *sya'ir*, of Hamzah Fansuri. The preparation of my dissertation for publication was mostly done in this environment of ANU.

At ANU, Hisako wrote a master' s thesis on divorce among Muslims on the basis of data gathered from one of the KUA (Office of Religious Affairs) offices in Yogyakarta region while we were living in Kotagede. In order to analyze and interpret the significance of those data, she had to study figh on marriage and divorce since the data was recorded, collected and arranged by Pak Naib (head of KUA) and his subordinates following the framework of *figh*. Using this unobtrusive method, the research results made her assert that the practices of Muslims in Yogyakarta in divorce followed Islamic law. This was contrary to a widely held view among Western scholars that divorce in Java was regulated by adat.<sup>7</sup> The late Adurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) who joined the examination of Hisako's MA thesis as an external examiner, gave a high evaluation on her work and later wrote a foreword to its published version. Gus Dur stated as follows: "In essence, this work's message should be taken seriously: it is impossible to separate completely Indonesian from Islamic studies since exclusive reliance on one approach endangers the objectivity of the findings".<sup>7</sup>

An international Qur'an conference held in Canberra in 1979 to commemorate the beginning of the 15th century of Islamic calendar made Hisako and me acquaint with a number of prominent scholars in world-wide Islamic studies including William Graham, a student of Wilfred C. Smith and then professor of comparative religion at Harvard. We were very happy to be invited to Harvard by him as visiting fellows at the Center for the Study of World Religions, 1981-1982, a famous institution established by Prof. Smith. In fact, Smith initially had appreciated Geertz's ethnography, The Religion of Java, as a detailed description of Islam lived by actual people. He hoped for more to come from Geertz in this direction and wished for a close cooperation to develop between Islamic studies and anthropology in the future (personal conversation with Prof. Smith in 1981). Smith confided to us that his expectation had not been filled. However, Smith's wish became exactly what we wished for: a closer cooperation between anthropology and Islamic studies.

Harvard experience made us richer intellectually. We learned elementary Arabic and also took courses in Islamic studies given by Smith, Annemarie Schimmel, and Graham. As I wrote in the postscript of my Banyan Tree book, through our stay at Harvard we learned that a number of practices and notions, which we had regarded before specifically of local Javanese or Kotagede origins, were in fact universal ones in the Islamic world.<sup>6</sup> For the first time, for example, we realized that Pendopo Sopingin was named after Imam Syafi'i, and my friend's name Asngari was taken from Imam Asy'ari! Also, we understood why the names of the kampongs, Kudusan and Boharen were appropriate for areas of traditional strongholds of santri.

However, our wish for the promotion of cooperation between Indonesian, or more widely, Southeast Asian area studies and Islamic studies met doubt, denial, and disregard by our colleagues for some time to follow. We were often regarded merely as 'Islam-file' in spite of the fact that I came from a Christian family and Hisako, a Buddhist one. In fact, it was only that we became aware of the significance of Islam and Muslims for the total humanity mainly through our daily experience and academic exercise. We came to share the conviction of W. C. Smith that mutual understanding between the Muslim and Non-Muslim parts of the mankind was vital to its future. Meanwhile, plans for publication of our works from Anglo-Saxon publishers met some difficulty so much so that we had a fortune of having an offer from Gadjah Mada University Press headed by a Christian Chinese Executive Director, the late Pak Drs. Koesoemanto to publish both of them.

Back to Japan in 1983, the academic situation was no less miserable than Western campuses in spite of the fact that social life of the Japanese was gravely affected by the OPEC's control over oil export since 1973 and Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979. Islamic studies were still very much underdeveloped yet, engaged by only a small group of scholars. Department of Islamic Studies was barely established as only one in the nation at the University of Tokyo in 1983.

The following story will indicate clearly how far area studies and Islamic

studies were kept separated in Japan of the mid-1980s. Shortly after my return to Japan, I attended a national conference of Southeast Asian studies held in Tokyo. There were a number of political scientists who were still seeing the rise of modern Indonesian nationalism solely in terms of the growth of Western educated intellectuals, exemplified by the birth of Budi Utomo. Nagazumi's work on Budi Utomo was a Bible for them. I cast a doubt to the audience on that generalization and pointed out the presence of KH Ahmad Dahlan, the founder of Muhammadiyah, in the very organization as its religious adviser. I also pointed out the fact that the formation of the first mass organization of Indonesian national awakening, i. e. Sarekat Islam, was inspired by the very Islamic notion of popular sovereignty and Muslim solidarity. I explained the fact that 'kedaulatan rakyat', i.e. the core concept of modern nationalism and democracy promoted by the early nationalist movements then was a concept of Arabic/Islamic derivation from the root of daula. Political scientists and historians among the audience of the conference countered my statement with utter disbelief and guestioned where on the earth I came up with that strange idea. I answered simply, "Please look up in Hans Wehr's Arabic-English dictionary edited by Cowan." In fact, my meager familiarity with the Arabic language, which I had begun at Harvard made me utter the above statement rather spontaneously.

## ANTHROPOLOGY, SOCIAL SCIENCES, AND ISLAMIC STUDIES

Still in the mid-1980s in Japan, I had an occasion of interviewing candidates for research fellowship, in which I had to face a sad reality: I interviewed a Malay studies student and an Indonesian studies student. Both were PhD candidates in anthropology from a leading university. I gave the former a passage from Sejarah Melayu depicting the famous scene of conversion of Parameswara into Islam and asked him to translate it, tell from where the passage was taken, and comment on its significance for Malay studies. He was apparently puzzled and finally confessed that he was unable to answer my questions. He speculated that the passage might be quoted from the Qur'an! It was obvious that he, an anthropology student of Malay studies, had never read Sejarah Melayu before, neither the Qur'an. The latter student was given a passage from Babad Tanah Jawi in Indonesian translation, the part describing the scene of trial and eventual execution of Seh Siti Jenar by the council of *wali*. This student was also at a loss for some time facing my question. He finally answered hesitantly that it might be a quote from contemporary kebatinan literature.

Such separation of Indonesian and Islamic studies went on for some time during the 1980s in spite of the warning of Gus Dur. On this tendency, William Roff lamented that there is "an extraordinary desire on the part of Western social science for the diminution of Islam", … "obscuring its role and position in Southeast Asia, past and present".<sup>8</sup> We can find this tendency as late as 1987 in the publication of a book by another leading American anthropologist, James Peacock, on the Muhammadiyah movement. Peacock was surprised to come across in an official biography of KH Ahmad Dahlan, the founder of Muhammadiyah, the fact that "traditional Javanese virtues like *sabar* and *ikhlas* were employed to depict his personality".<sup>9</sup> On the basis of these and other observations, Peacock concludes0that "Javanese cultural core is hidden underneath the Islamic layers of Muhammadiyah".<sup>10</sup> Apparently, he was unaware then of the fact there was one of the most frequently recited Surah in the Qur'an entitled 'Al Ikhlas'.

Attempts of Hisako and myself to promote cooperation of anthropology, or Western social science in general, and Islamic studies began to receive warm support from Muslim intellectuals of Indonesia. We came into rather close relationships with a number of Islamic scholars and administrators including Nurcholish Madjid, Mukti Ali, Munawir Syadzali, Soedjatmoko, Syafi'i Ma'arif, Malik Fadjar et al. in addition to Abdurrahman Wahid mentioned above. Some of them occupied high government positions and leaderships of mass organizations, and so much so that Hisako and I were often accused that we were inclined to associate with power holders disregarding Little People who should be the proper partner of anthropologist. In fact, our association with them began well ahead of their social eminence. All those individuals were independent persons standing on their own feet with integrity and dedication for cause. Hisako and I were given tremendous encouragement from them.

The most critical of Geertz among them was Pak Koko, i.e. Soedjatmoko. In a seminar held at the LP3ES in 1978, answering to a question from the floor, I heard him comment on *The Religion of Java*. He said to the effect that Geertz had applied anthropological method suited for the study of primitive, illiterate society, i.e. participant observation and interviews alone, in Java, at the expense of ignoring the vast amount of civilizational attainment of Javanese people (see below for detail). Pak Koko's criticism expressed mine so beautifully. I became more boldly critical of Geertz after having heard those words uttered by one of 'the Best and the Brightest' of the contemporary Indonesian intellectuals."

Meanwhile, towards the end of 1980s, a number of young American anthropologists started to express critical stance vis-à-vis the preceding generation of Geertz and Peacock concerning their view on Islam in Indonesia. Most prominent among them are Robert Hefner, John Bowen and Mark Woodward. Hefner initially followed Geertz's concern for peasant economy of Java covering a highland area, Tengger, which was an enclave of 'Hindu' people for his field.<sup>10</sup> However, he became to feel that "Islam has often not been given its due" in the Indonesian studies of the US,<sup>11</sup> and started to "seek to correct the earlier marginalization of Islam in Indonesian studies". Bowen went to study social structure and history in the Gayo highlands of Sumatra. There, he has found that Gayo's 'local knowledge' had been developed over centuries by "elaborating, transforming and adapting elements from broader Muslim traditions".<sup>12</sup> In Gayo, religion was a continuing discourse in which "the elements of Muslim tradition that were most universal were also matters of intense local concern and debate". Thus, he was of the view that a scheme assuming the separation of Great and Little Tradition and center and periphery in the Islamic world was untenable. Woodward, intending to find syncretic remains of Hinduism in the Sultanate court of Yogyakarta, visited and lived near the court. There, instead of Hindu remains, he came across the Garebeg festival, which was no other than the Javanized celebration of Maulud Nabi. Following this, in the very core of the Yogyakarta court culture, he found a series of evidence suggesting the fact that Islamic piety and mysticism were finely integrated into a whole. <sup>13</sup>

Hefner, Bowen, Woodward and I were all encouraged by and learned a lot from pioneering work of Dale Eickelman, who began as a loyal student of Geertz yet later became bold enough to revise the teaching of his Guru. Getting a master's degree in Islamic studies at McGill and obtaining a PhD in anthropology from Chicago – an ideal combination of two disciplines to engage in anthropology of Islam — Eickelman has contributed greatly to the real shaping of anthropology of Islam. He advocates a research strategy of setting up a 'middle ground', which is larger than 'village'— that is the traditional field of participant observation for anthropologist — yet narrower than the concern of scholars of religious studies and Orientalists.<sup>14</sup> 'Middle ground' is the space, where the anthropologist can accumulate substantial amount of empirical data on the transmission of universal teachings of Islam in the local contexts with a definite framework of space and time. He did show the practice of this middle ground approach in his work on the life history of a gadi in contemporary Morocco.<sup>15</sup>

Another significant contribution to the development of anthropology of Islam came from Europe in the person of Martin van Bruinessen. He commands Arabic as well as a number of local languages of the Muslim world and maintains personally a comparative perspective since his major fields of concern are the Kurdi and the Javanese. Bruinessen has also contributed to the revival and further development of centuries-old Dutch scholarship on traditional Islamic literature in Java. His concentration on the study of Kitab Kuning has indicated persuasively that textual studies are inseparable from contextual approach in order to grasp the actual working of universal values of Islam in local contexts via the texts taught by *kyai* and *ulama* at *pesantren*. Spearheaded by Eickelman and Bruinessen and supported by a number of capable anthropologists of the current generation, anthropology of Muslim societies in Southeast Asia, especially that of Indonesia, seems to have entered a new stage of maturity.

In the neighboring disciplines of history and philology, a great advancement has also been made recently. First of all, two standard modern histories on Southeast Asia, one on Indonesia,<sup>16</sup> and the other on Malaysia,<sup>17</sup> start their historical narratives from the time of Islamization of the region. This perspective has been shared and consolidated by a number of their colleagues including Anthony Johns, Anthony Reid, and Anthony Milner. More recently and more specifically on the literary history of Islam in Malay-Indonesian world, significant contributions were made by Alijah Gordon,<sup>18</sup> Peter Riddell,<sup>19</sup> and Vladimir Braginsky.<sup>20</sup> Among them, the work by Braginsky seems to be most comprehensive and will become one of the most reliable reference books for the study of Peradaban Melayu for anthropologist as well for a long time to come.

In the discipline of history, Prof. Azyumardi's achievement is truly monumental. Pak Azra has explored and presented personal networks and intellectual genealogy among *ulama* connecting them beyond the regions of North Africa, the Middle East, the Indian Sub-Continent, and across the Indian Ocean during the 17th and 18th centuries. He did this on the basis of examining primary sources of their biographies in Arabic. Following Pak Azra's path, Michael Laffan's new work seems to be exploring the significance of these networks in the field of modern Islamic politics as the basis of popular nationalism.21

Now I would like to mention a recent statement by Prof. Dr. Amin Abdullah, former Rector of UIN Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta, and uploaded on-line on 12 January 2011 at his own home page, http://aminabd.wordpress.com/. It is entitled "Urgency of anthropological approach in the study of religion and the study of Islam," or in Indonesian original, "Urgensi pendekatan antropologi untuk studi agama dan studi Islam." Through the essay, Pak Amin is urging his colleagues in the circles of UINs, IAINs and other institutions of Islamic higher learning in Indonesia that the discipline of anthropology is to be brought into the circles in order to make a substantial advancement in the study of religion in general and in the study of Islam in particular. In summary, Pak Amin's argument is as follows: Religious phenomenon always has two dimensions, normative and historical, which cannot be separated but differentiated for study.<sup>22</sup> In reality, religious practices among people are often different despite they are referring to the same sources for norms, ex. The Qur'an and the Sunna in the case of Muslims. Anthropology is required to deal with this complicated situation. It can provide a map (peta) to describe and guide without being biased by certain interests.<sup>23</sup> Anthropology, through its longterm, intensive, systematic, deep and balanced participant observation, produces 'thick description', on the basis of field notes rather than relying on texts like philologists. Pak Amin's discussion goes on to touch upon a contemporary problem of diversity of views among Islamic jurists, fukaha. He proposes a three-stage historical development of the relationship among Syariah, Prophetic Tradition and fukaha. Anthropology of religion can explain the religious diversity in objective terms and help promote mutual understandings among individuals and groups holding those diverse views.<sup>24</sup>

I do agree with his appeal to take anthropology of religion seriously in the circles of UINs and IAINs provided that those employ the discipline do not step into the bias and excess I have mention above, that is the tendency to disregard Great Tradition of a civilization. In fact, the UIN/IAIN communities seem naturally free from that tendency since the people of those academic communities are supposedly well versed in Arabic, have memorized the Qur'an and have read widely in the Hadith.<sup>25</sup>

### **ENDNOTES**

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