

Javanese Women and Islam: Identity Formation since the Twentieth Century

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Despite the vast research over the last three decades devoted to the lives and social interaction of Javanese women, little has been written on the formation of these women's identity by focusing on its development from the twentieth century up to the early twenty-first. This paper endeavors to show that the religio-cultural identity of Javanese women was forged through a number of sociocultural circumstances. While revealing different features of the relationship between Javanese women and Islam, I shed light on the role Islam played, particularly since the early twentieth century, in providing transformative power to the role and status of Javanese Muslim women, manifested by the adoption of such Islamic dress codes as veiling, as also an important means of identity politics. I argue that new Islamic discourses have always been born out of the desire to challenge the conservative understanding of the role and status of Javanese women in different historical periods.

Keywords: Javanese women, Islam, identity formation, veiling, identity politics

Introduction

Since the late fifteenth century, Islamization has brought about a significant social transformation in Java. Islamization in Java was marked by the transition from the ancient East Javanese Hindu-Buddhist regimes (Majapahit Kingdom) to the Javanese Islamic rulers on the north coast, and later to the Mataram Islamic Kingdom (Yogyakarta). The shifting configuration wrought changes not only in Javanese religiosity but also in Javanese livelihoods, affecting everyone, including the women. However, over the last three decades, studies of women in Java have tended to overlook Javanese women's dynamic intersection with Islam, framing it within identity formation. For example, some earlier scholars—including Hildred Geertz (1961), Robert Jay (1969), and Koentjaraningrat (1957)—focused on the structure of the relationship between the sexes in Java. Ann

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Stoler (1977) examined rural Javanese women's economic independence under the Dutch cultivation system (1830–70). In the urban-contemporary context, Norma Sullivan (1994) observed the livelihood of a Javanese lower-class urban family in Yogyakarta, and Hotze Lont (2000) studied urban Javanese women's responses to microfinance credit institutions. In a rural setting, Valerie Hull (1976) researched the different degrees of Javanese women's autonomy in Yogyakarta. In the context of the household, G. G. Weix (2000) studied the agency of elite Javanese women in controlling the home-based cigarette business in Kudus, while Ratna Saptari (2000a) focused on the utilization of kin-based and inter-household networks. The dominant role of Javanese women in trading and economic activities has been the subject of copious research by prominent academics such as Geertz (1961), Cora Vreede-De Stuers (1960), Suzanne Brenner (1995), Barbara Hatley (1990), and Ward Keeler (1990).

Scholars have only recently begun to consider Islam as a variable affecting Indonesian women. Susan Blackburn (2002) looked into the twentieth-century discourse of Indonesian Muslim women's roles in politics, and then further examined the history of Indonesian women in political Islam (2008). Sally White and Maria Ulfah Anshor (2008) provided current snapshots of the growth of Islamic perspectives after 1998. Kathryn Robinson (2009, 11–29) offered the latest analysis of Islam and Indonesian women after 1998, where she provided some examples of the local adaptation (such as in Java) to Islam in the early 1920s. In all, I suggest that there is a gap between the empirical situation of Javanese women's intersection with Islam, which was an important element shaping the formation of the women's identity, and the bulk of research that has only recently begun to address it. This paper bridges that gap by providing a portrait of the role of Islam in the identity formation of Javanese Muslim women, focusing on the subject from the twentieth century up to the early twenty-first.

I contend that the identity formation of Javanese Muslim women has been influenced by the nature of Islam and the political configuration in which, since the early twentieth century, new Islamic discourses have always emerged from the need to challenge conservative understandings of the role and status of Javanese women. Based on the nature of Islamic thinking and practice that influenced the different historical periods as the defining force in shaping Javanese Muslim women's identity, I identify four periods depicting these women's interaction with Islam. While in the first phase the nature of "syncretic" Islam in Java constrained particularly the Javanese noblewomen, in the second phase, since the early twentieth century, Islam (pioneered by the Islamic reformism of Muhammadiyah) and nationalism were positive transformative powers in the social positioning of Javanese women by employing a new discourse and setting out a portrait of the ideal Javanese Muslim woman. In the third phase, the resurgent Islam of the 1970s lent considerable

spirit to Javanese Muslim women to express identity politics as a way of countering the New Order's severe stance on political Islam. In the fourth phase, Islam as a belief has provided a strong religious foundation for female leadership in local politics that has facilitated the rise of Javanese Muslim women as political leaders in direct local elections since 2005.

Koentjaraningrat (1985, 2) defined Java as encompassing the Javanese people, culture, and linguistic group of Central and East Java, while the western part of the island was home to the Sundanese. Based on Koentjaraningrat's concept, the examples explored in this paper are centered mainly on Javanese women in Central and East Java, although a few are derived from West Java to give a general picture of Islamization on the island of Java. The historical records cited in this paper date back from the 1850s through to the 1950s and were obtained mainly from the National Library of Indonesia in Jakarta, with a few from the library of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies in Kyoto University, Japan, in January 2010 and April 2010.

Identity Formation: Current Debate and Position

Erik Erikson's work (1950), based on Freudian psychological theory, is a pioneering treatise on identity formation. However, Erikson and neo-Eriksonian identity theories such as those proposed by James Marcia (1980), or James Cote and Charles Levine (1987), are currently being evaluated in order to incorporate sociocultural aspects. For example, Cote (1996) and Gerald Adams and Sheila Marshall (1996, 438) argued that identity formation was influenced by macro and micro environments,¹ as did Seth Schwartz (2001, 49) and Elli Schachter (2005, 390). In this paper, I adopt Adams and Marshall's concept (1996) that identity formation is influenced by macro and micro environments.² In revealing the identity formation of Javanese Muslim women, I initially present the experiences of some individual Javanese women in dealing with Islamic

1) "Macro environment" refers to culture, economics, population demographics, politics, institutional values, physical environments, social class, caste, and race; "micro environments" include interpersonal communication, conversations, written words, media, and common or routine daily interactions.

2) My concern with the macro environment is reinforced by Shamsul A.B.'s idea (1996, 477–478) that identity formation takes place within "two social realities": the "authority-defined" context, where the discourse on identity is authoritatively defined by people in power; and the "everyday-defined" context, where the discourse on identity is experienced by the people in their everyday lives. At different points I reveal both the "authority-defined" and the "everyday-defined" context in the identity formation of Javanese Muslim women.

norms, values, and ideology that were socialized, constructed, and communicated through signs, symbols, and expectations either in language or discourse in the early stages of Islamization in Java. These are useful for gaining an insight into the general picture of the Javanese Muslim women's identity.

There are numerous studies on identity formation in Indonesia.³⁾ This paper is positioned within the ethno-religious gender-based group of studies because it observes specifically the identity formation of ethnic Javanese women. In dealing with Islam, I pay special attention to the norm and practice of wearing the veil, because I believe it is an important aspect signifying identity formation in Javanese Muslim women, which later became an important means of creating a distinct political identity and attracting Islamic-based voters in direct local elections first implemented in 2005.

Islamization and Its Consequences for Javanese Women

At least up to the late fifteenth century, Hindu civilization was the defining force that shaped the identity of Javanese women. For example, Javanese noblewomen enjoyed a preeminent status and played a strong role in the family and community during the Hindu-Javanese period, including in the Majapahit Kingdom around the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, as noted by Peter Carey and Vincent Houben (1987, 15) and Ann Kumar (2000, 88–104). However, the situation changed considerably following Islamic penetration into Java.

Scholars often disagree on the nature of Java's Islamization. For example, Clifford Geertz's "syncretic Islam" (1960, 5–6, 130) asserts that the Javanese religious system is one of syncretic Islam characterized by a mix of animism, Hinduism, and Islam. Anthony Reid (2000) suggested that Southeast Asian Islam, including that in Malaya and Java, was primarily influenced by mystical Sufism brought by Sufi orders (Malay *tarekat*). Mark Woodward (1989, 2–17) believed that Islamic Sufism was the most influential element in Islamization in Java, while Jay (1963, 6) argued that Islam's spread to Java involved the contestation between syncretism (embraced by the Javanese aristocracy of the Mataram/

3) For example: ethno-religious studies by scholars such as Zaenuddin Prasajo (2010), who studied the revitalization of the indigenous Dayak Katab Kebahan Muslim community in West Borneo; studies of decentralization and economy politics, such as Moira Moeliono and Godwin Limberg's study (2004) on the impact of regional autonomy since 1999 in Malinau, Northeast Kalimantan, and Manggarai, West Flores; and ethnic- and gender-policy-based studies such as Rebecca Elmhirst's (2000) on the identity formation and struggle of female Javanese transmigrants in North Lampung.

Yogyakarta Islamic court) and orthodox Islam (embraced by the northeastern coastal rulers).

Despite the diverging theories, it is obvious that the history of Islamization in Java is closely linked to the religion's practice by the nobility, as Barbara Andaya (2000, 246) suggests, where the Mataram/Yogyakarta aristocracy took control of Islamization following the defeat of the orthodox Islam (Jay 1963, 11–13) of the northeastern coastal rulers in the mid-seventeenth century. I suggest it was the Javanese noblewomen who initially interacted considerably with, and had to conform to, the Islamic norm. Here, I believe the Javanese noblewomen's early intersection with Islam was not a calm one. The next section explores the tensions surrounding the Javanese noblewomen's adjustment to the new Islamic code of behavior and principles.

Constructing Identity as Javanese Muslim Women: Struggle and Adjustment

By the end of the sixteenth century, there was a new Islamized Javanese elite as a consequence of Islamic penetration into Java (Ricklefs 2007, 2). The Mataram Islamic court under Sultan Agung (1613–46) actively promoted, to borrow from M. C. Ricklefs, "Islamic mystic piety," but by the mid-nineteenth century this was to be challenged by Sharia-oriented reformers such as students at *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) and religious teachers from the north coast of Java (*ibid.*, 31–52).

While the spread of Islam on the island of Java had started long before the 1870s, stories of its proliferation were recorded in *Slomporet Melayoe*, the first Malay-language newspaper published in Java (Semarang). The *Slomporet Melayoe* from 1870 to 1897 features various issues related to the spread of Islam. For example: the inauguration of two ponds in the Kendal Mosque in which women participated (*Slomporet Melayoe*, August 24, 1878);⁴ the influence of Islam on marriage and ceremony in Anyer (*Selomporet Melaijoe*, September 3, 1870); neighborhood conflict arising from the noise of *beduk*,⁵ which in this case was amplified during the days and nights of Ramadan in Pandeglang (*Slomporet Melaijoe*, February 19, 1876); the story of *pengulu*⁶ at the Semarang Mosque explaining the rationale of issuing *talak*⁷ between husbands and wives (*Slomporet Melaijoe*, May 17,

4) There are four ways to spell the magazine title: *Slomporet Melayoe*, *Slomporet Melaijoe*, *Selomporet Melaijoe*, and *Selomporet Melayoe*. I follow the original spellings of the issues containing the articles I have cited.

5) Traditional Islamic gong made from leather used to announce *azhan* (prayer time).

6) *Ulama* who were part of the palace bureaucracy and responsible for managing mosque activities.

7) Divorce initiated by the husband.

1873); and stories of pilgrimage or Haj (*Selomporet Melaijoe*, October 1, 1870, March 11, 1871; *Slomporet Melaijoe*, December 31, 1875).

Equally interesting are the published opinions on the change in manners of Javanese who had recently returned from the Haj. Olo Ngangoer (*Slomporet Melaijoe*, March 8, 1873) criticized the tendency among Javanese who had undertaken the Haj to adopt Arabic-style clothes and shoes, and their preference to be addressed as “*tuan hadji*.” Ngangoer proposed that Javanese pilgrims should retain traditional Javanese dress to preserve Javanese values and customs, because he believed that being a *haji* (a pilgrim) was not always a guarantee of morality and obedience to the Islamic code. All of the foregoing indicate that Islamization in Java had a significant impact not only in signifying Islamic piety through devotion to the five pillars of Islam,⁸⁾ but also in defining the ideal relationship between men and women, behavioral changes related to the adoption of new Islamic principles or Arabic customs, and the gradual spread of mosques that soon dominated the social and architectural landscape in Java. A vivid picture of Islamization in Java can also be seen in the adoption of Islamic-style dress by Javanese women, which had been expected since the sixteenth century and spread further after the early twentieth century, as we shall see below.

The first code of conduct commonly associated with Islam is the adoption of the veil (*kudung*, or veiling).⁹⁾ Andaya (2000, 247) suggested that around the sixteenth century, upper-class women were expected to adopt the veil because Islam decreed that physical beauty was not for public display. However, I believe this normative expectation of veiling among noblewomen had not proliferated widely in Java between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. There are barely any photographs or pictures reflecting widespread adoption of the *kudung* among either noblewomen or ordinary women on the island in the nineteenth century. I suggest that the traditional dress style of Javanese women—namely, the *kemben*¹⁰⁾—was the dominant norm until the twentieth century. This is evident in Photos 1 and 2. Photo 1 below shows the typical Javanese noblewoman’s dress.

Why had Javanese women not embraced the *kudung* by the 1800s? I believe this had to do with the social and political conditions in Java at the time. Under the compulsory crop system from 1830 to 1870 (*kultuurstelsel*), all Javanese peasant men were conscripted as forced labor to service Dutch economic prosperity (Ratna 2000b, 17). It was

8) The five pillars of Islam are: *syahadah* (profession of the Islamic faith), prayer, *zakat* (religious alms), fasting, and *haj* (pilgrimage).

9) The *kudung* is the Muslim women’s veil covering the head and neck.

10) Traditional batik cloth worn as a sarong; a tube or length of fabric that covers a woman’s body from her chest all the way down to her legs. Her hair, neck, and arms are visible.



Photo 1 A Javanese Noblewoman

Source: Seorang wanita Jawa berdarah biru (*Java: Past and Present*, n.d.). Reproduced from the collection at the Indonesian National Library, Jakarta, January 2010.



Photo 2 Javanese Women Pounding Rice

Source: Para wanita Jawa menumbuk padi. *Nederlandsch Oost-Indische*, 1856. Reproduced from the collection at the Indonesian National Library, Jakarta, January 2010.

a time of hardship for the majority of Java's indigenous population. There was famine among the peasants due to poverty, which was compounded by the outbreak of a typhoid epidemic in Central Java from the 1840s to the 1850s (Ricklefs 2001, 157–161). Eduard Douwes Dekker's book, *Max Havelaar*, clearly describes the harsh life of Javanese peasants due to exploitation by the colonial government and the Javanese aristocracy.¹¹⁾

Moreover, rather than paying attention to Islamic dress style, Javanese noblewomen were busy defending their existence vis-à-vis the Javanese noblemen's declining supremacy. For example, Florida (1996, 212), in assessing Javano-Islamic literature, reveals that the intensification in Javanese elite men's writing of women's literature in the Surakarta court around the end of the nineteenth century was a result of the diminution of indigenous royal men's power in Java following the end of the Diponegoro War in 1830. Without military or political authority, the royal male elite, particularly in the Surakarta court, tried to assert their power by writing on women's literature to show the dominance of the male voice in constructing gender relations in late-nineteenth-century Java. For example, *Piwulang Estri* resonates with the male voice of the ideal, elite Javanese woman as a good wife (or co-wife) who is perfectly accommodating of her husband's polygamous desires and submissive to his authority (*ibid.*, 210–211). A similar illustration of the total submission of a woman to her husband's authority is given in *Serat Murtasiyah*, a poem in the genre of Islamic *santri* (devout Muslim) dating back to early-nineteenth-

11) See Multatuli (1978, 24–54).

century Java. The poem describes the exemplary, virtuous Javanese wife who surrenders completely to her husband—including to his violence—and devotes herself to his happiness (*ibid.*, 217–219). This example corresponds with Koentjaraningrat's (1980, 13) observation that Javanese intellectuals had to accept Islamic concepts and incorporate them into the Central Javanese cultural tradition from the second half of the eighteenth century.

The second practice associated with Islam, although it is actually not new to Javanese custom (*adat*), is polygamy. During the Hindu-Buddhist civilization, it was common for noblemen to maintain co-wives (*selir*) or concubines. The practice persisted. For example, one edition of *Selompret Melaijoe* contains a description of Javanese *priyayi* (noblemen) who often had two or three wives (*Selompret Melaijoe*, October 26, 1887). Another well-known example is that of R. A. Kartini (1879–1904), daughter of the Regent of Jepara, Central Java. Born of a mother who had been trapped in a polygamous marriage, Kartini wrote in one of her letters that she would be more than willing to end this unfair *adat*, which she believed was exacerbated by a narrow interpretation and practice of Islam.¹² Although Kartini opposed polygamy, she could do nothing when in 1903 her father asked her to marry the Regent of Rembang, who already had three secondary wives (Thomson Zainu'ddin 1980, 9–10; Cote 2005). One instance of resistance to polygamy is Pakubuwono IX's first queen, who committed suicide following her husband's decision to take another wife. There is also Sekar Kadhaton, the daughter of Pakubuwono VII, who refused to get married, in rejection of the male ideology of polygamy and the construction of the virtuous and defeated wife (Florida 1996, 215–216).

The third practice, which I believe already existed in *adat* but was amplified by Islam, is *pingitan*.¹³ Islam decreed that pious women and noblewomen should lower their gaze before men, to preserve their purity. Men were encouraged to show their devotion publicly, such as by going to mosques, while women were expected to stay home as a manifestation of their devotion and dignity (Andaya 2000, 246). Seclusion, according to Andaya (*ibid.*, 246–247), was a condition for noblewomen in Java before the 1500s; and when the Dutch arrived in Banten in 1596, they made the same observations of both Java and Flores. The practice persisted until the late nineteenth century among *priyayi* women such as Kartini, who underwent *pingitan* from 1892—when she was 12 years old—to 1898 (Thomson Zainu'ddin 1980, 4; Kartinah 1955).

In the early years of Java's Islamization (from the 1700s to the end of the 1800s), Javanese noblewomen were those most affected, precisely because of the nature of Islam-

12) See Kartini's letter to Stella titled "To Stella Zeehandelaar," in Geertz (1985, 81–82).

13) A period of time in which women were kept at home, secluded from the public sphere.

ization that was implemented in the Javanese royal court. Ordinary Javanese women seem to have been less affected. For example, poverty made it difficult for lower-class Javanese men to have more than one wife (see Locher-Scholten 2000, 32–33). Javanese noblewomen struggled with the various rules of conduct imposed on them by the Javanese male elite through textualized norms such as *Piwulang Estri* or *Serat Murtasiyah*. This was the “authority-defined” context of identity (to borrow from Shamsul A. B. 1996) invoking the Javanese noblewomen to show their Islamic modesty.

In my view this is actually a further consequence of the nature of the syncretic Islam propagated by the Mataram Kingdom since the mid-seventeenth century. I argue that Islamization at this stage was not intended to liberate Javanese women from the established *adat* (for example, the practice of polygamy and *pingitan* explored earlier). I believe that in this early stage of Islamization, Javanese noblewomen found Islamic discourse and practice more hampering than liberating. Although by the mid-nineteenth century there were professional Javanese Islamic groups of *putihan* (the “white” or “pure ones”) in *pesantren* communities throughout Java’s coastal areas, I believe their appearance had little impact on Javanese women because the *pesantren* allowed only males to attend sessions, as Ricklefs (2007, 50–70) points out. However, the situation changed considerably with the Islamic reformist movement of the early twentieth century, which gradually opened the door for Javanese women to actively pursue Islamic teachings and allowed their entry into public schools. This will be discussed shortly.

Consciousness, Contestation, and Revelation of Identity

The spread of Islam in Java after the early twentieth century occurred at the same time as the rise of women’s emancipation, in line with the spirit of nationalism and the establishment of the Islamic reformist movement. The awakening of women’s consciousness in the East Indies (now Indonesia) had been preceded by a largely Java-based movement to educate women. Kartini has been regarded as the champion of women’s emancipation. After her death, her spirit inspired subsequent efforts to educate women through various educational institutions (Vreede-De Stuers 1960, 58–59). The period between 1912 and 1928 also recorded a rise in the number of women’s associations both across and outside of Java. Prominent among them was Putri Mardika, founded in Jakarta in 1912 with the aid of the nationalist organization Budi Utomo (Indonesia, Department of Information, 1968, 10; Sukanti 1984, 85–86).

Some of the women’s associations published their own magazines to voice their concerns. In the Putri Mardika magazine there is evidence to show how Islam was per-

ceived vis-à-vis the old-fashioned Javanese *adat* in defining the ideal woman in the early twentieth century. Putri Mardika's goal, which was inspired by Kartini's spirit, was as follows: "Mardika" means freedom, which gives women room to express their thoughts as independent citizens who are able to make their own decisions (*Poetri Mardika* 1915; 1917). This goal was underpinned by the rising awareness among *bumi putra Jawa* (*lit.*, the sons of Java, or indigenous Javanese) that the old-fashioned *adat* (child marriage, *pingitan*, no schooling, polygamy, and total submission to the husband) were no longer acceptable and that things must change.¹⁴⁾

The early twentieth century was also an era of a global consciousness of nationalism, as reflected in Putri Mardika's goal that both men and women were important elements in the nation's aspirations concerning the progress and dignity of the *bumi putra* (Sd 1915a; S Koesoemo 1917a). Putri Mardika proposed that the ideal Muslim woman should be able to maintain the good aspects of *adat* and imbibe Islamic religiosity so that she would not be easily fooled by her husband in her march toward progress, in order to ensure that Muslim women would not follow in the footsteps of their European counterparts who had crossed boundaries (S Koesoemo 1917b). In practice, Putri Mardika encouraged women to participate in the public sphere in partnership with men (Sd 1915a). The association provided scholarships for women to study in Java or in the Netherlands (*Poetri Mardika* 1915) and built schools for women in West Java, with branches in East Java (Bestuur 1917). *Isteri*, the official magazine of the Indonesian Wives Association (Perikatan Perhimpunan Isteri Indonesia, or PPII, founded in 1928), also framed women's progress within the national consciousness. For example, in one of its 1932 editions it exhorted Indonesian women to be knowledgeable so as to be progressive and to work alongside men in the fight for Indonesian independence (Patrem 1932).

The limits of Javanese women's development were framed by the concept of *kodrat*¹⁵⁾ or *fitrah*.¹⁶⁾ K. H Dewantoro, leader of the Perguruan Taman Siswa, an educational institution founded in Yogyakarta in 1922, used the concept of *kodrat* without reference to

14) For a discourse on the criticism and rising awareness regarding the old-fashioned Javanese *adat* and perception of women, see Pr (1915), Sd (1915a; 1915b), and Kijahi (1917).

15) The word *kodrat*, according to Nasaruddin Umar (1999), derives from the Arabic *qudrah*, meaning "the ability to do a particular thing within the bounds of appropriateness." Umar further argued that underlying the concept of *kodrat* were the biological differences between women and men. According to him, this resulted in different roles for men and women: certain roles for women were dictated by their biological structure, for example, pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding. On the other hand, certain roles were more appropriately assumed by men, such as work requiring physical strength.

16) *Fitrah* espouses the different roles between women and men on account of their respective biological structures, which implies appropriateness and boundaries for both women and men.

Islam when explaining women's progress. He believed that in trying to achieve progress in the public sphere alongside men, women should remember their *kodrat* rooted in *iman* (belief in God)—without reference to any religion (K. H Dewantoro 1938). *Kodrat*, without reference to Islam or other religions, was also used by PPII representatives in the Budi Utomo Congress (*Isteri* 1931b).

Conversely, the concept of *fitriah* with reference to Islam is apparent in *Taman Moeslimah*, an Islamic magazine published in Solo and affiliated with Muhammadiyah.¹⁷ It states that the progress of Javanese women should be in accordance with *fitriah*—not taking on men's work (as doctors, machinists, or politicians, for instance) and not mixing with men publicly (Sriwijat 1926). A more progressive view was printed in the *Islam Raja* magazine, which was also affiliated with Muhammadiyah and published in Solo. Asm Sdm (1939) said that Muslim women had an obligation to support public movements, or to be educators inside and outside of the home, to perform duties as good wives, and to propagate Islam. Later, in 1940, the norm of being a good wife was further specified as *isteri Islam yang berarti* (the truly Islamic wife), according to which Muslim women were expected to serve as best they could as wives and mothers (*Islam Raja* 1940). Considering *Islam Raja's* affiliation with Muhammadiyah, it may not be a coincidence that prior to 1940, 'Aisyiyah (Muhammadiyah's female branch) had introduced the classical book titled *Isteri Islam yang berarti* (in 1937), which focused on women's private roles as wife and mother (PP Muhammadiyah Majlis 'Aisyiyah n.d., 10).¹⁸ To facilitate Muslim women's growing understanding of Islamic principles, they were encouraged to join preacher schools to become female preachers (*mubhalighot*), such as those in Solo (*Islam Raja* 1939). These examples reveal the influence Islam had in defining the ideal Javanese woman. Islam was perceived as a guidance and norm (such as *fitriah*) that differentiated its followers from those pursuing European-style progress. In the broader context, the general discourse of Indonesian women's progress is framed in the spirit of nationhood and the concept of *kodrat*.

At the same time, my observations uncovered criticism of Islamic practices. R Soepomo (1931) argued that while women's status and rights according to customary law (*hukum adat*) were equal to those of men (such as in inheritance or divorce) before the arrival of Islam, Islamic practices replaced this customary law, which in effect degraded their status and rights. Dewi Sekartadji (1932b) also criticized Islam, which she believed deprived women of the rights—such as rights in divorce and polygamy—that they enjoyed

17) Muhammadiyah is an Islamic reformist movement founded by K. H. Ahmad Dahlan in 1912. It began in Kauman, Yogyakarta, and then spread throughout Indonesia.

18) For a longitudinal analysis of 'Aisyiyah's normative guidance from the 1930s until today, see my Master thesis Kurniawati (2007, 57–77; 2008).

under Hindu civilization. Sekartadji's writing certainly provoked debate. Muslims writing in the *Bintang Islam* magazine, and a reader in Medan, refuted Sekartadji's opinion. Sekartadji responded by arguing that she did not intend to degrade Islam; rather, she was urging a return to the spirit of nationalism exemplified in Java's past Hindu civilization, and prioritization of Indonesian independence (Dewi 1932a). There was also criticism of the Islamic norm of segregating women in public meetings such as the Indonesia Raya Congress (Rit 1931–32).

Maria Ulfah Santoso, a prominent Indonesian activist, criticized the Islamic practices further by arguing that while the Qur'an was not intended to degrade women, in practice the husband enjoyed a greater religious right in initiating *talak* and that the religious court often refused a woman's initiation of divorce, thereby rendering wives, especially battered wives, more vulnerable to spousal abuse (Maria 1940). In response, devout Muslims, such as those writing in the Solo magazine *Islam Raja*, defended Islam by arguing that it was a religion of progress and was in full compliance with modernity, citing several *santri* who succeeded in managing modern educational institutes, hospitals, orphanages, and a publishing house (Sarwo 1940).

The above exploration clearly indicates a shifting perception toward the contribution of Islam to women's progress. While around the 1920s Islam had been perceived as an alternative value to steer Indonesian women's progress vis-à-vis European progress, between 1920 and 1940 there was a mounting debate between those who perceived Islam as detrimental to women, and the champions of reformist Islam (Muhammadiyah) who defended Islamic practices by acknowledging Islam's contribution to progress.¹⁹⁾ Although the above discourse in newspapers and magazines refers mostly to Indonesian women, and a few specifically refer to Javanese women, I believe it had a significant impact on the identity formation of Javanese women, who had been surrounded by the raging debate on a daily basis. The deliberations intensified toward the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century, contesting the definition of the ideal Javanese Muslim woman.

Since the early twentieth century, the norm of wearing the *kudung* gained acceptance; polygamy has persisted even to this day, while *pingitan* has become a relic of the past. Andree Feillard's study reveals that prior to the 1920s many women in the Indonesian archipelago wore the traditional *kemben*, but Islamization brought on the adoption of what would become the Malay-Indonesian dress consisting of the *kebaya*,²⁰⁾ the sarong, and the head shawl (Feillard 1999). This dress code was observed in both urban and rural

19) For comparison and more written sources from this period with a special focus on Islamic reformists, see White (2004).

20) A close-fitting blouse.

areas, but particularly among *santri*, who wore a *kain*²¹⁾ wrapped tightly around their hips, a *kebaya* blouse, and *kerudung*,²²⁾ while rural women wrapped the *kerudung* around their necks (*ibid.*).

Islamic groups such as 'Aisyiyah also promoted the adoption of the *kudung*, initially in Kauman, Yogyakarta. Since the 1920s, 'Aisyiyah's promotion of the *kudung* was underpinned by K. H. Ahmad Dahlan's eagerness to elevate the status of female *priyayi* (noblewomen) and *santri* in Kauman. At the time, it was widely believed that the proper place of the *priyayi* was at home (Koentjaraningrat 1985, 242). The unquestioned acceptance of the Islamic-Javanese proverb "*Wadon iku neroko katut, suwargo nunut*"²³⁾ indicated this subordinate status (Ahmad 2000, 96). Dahlan launched his pursuit to enhance women's social status by citing from the Qur'an verse 97 of *An-Nahl*²⁴⁾ and verse 124 of *An-Nisa*²⁵⁾ (Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah n.d.: 1). Dahlan, together with his wife Siti Walidah, developed a religious consciousness among Muslim women by sending girls in Kauman to formal schools (Alfian 1969, 272).

While Islam via Muhammadiyah under Dahlan's leadership liberated Javanese women from the old-fashioned *adat*, the latter still had to conform to the Islamic norm of becoming *wanita sholehah*,²⁶⁾ through, among other things, wearing the *kerudung*. It was 'Aisyiyah that initially introduced the Islamic woman's clothing style, for instance wearing the *jarit* as a lower cloth to cover the hips and legs, and the *kebaya* as an upper cloth in combination with the *kudung*, and socks to cover the feet (Lin 1952). 'Aisyiyah's propagation was facilitated by the *Suara 'Aisyiyah* magazine, which began using the Indonesian language in 1928 (Soeara 'Aisijah 1940; Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah n.d., 30). Photo 3 illustrates the proper way of wearing the *kudung* among (Javanese) Muslim women.

The wearing of the *kudung* was also demonstrated outside of Muhammadiyah, such as in the *Islam Raja* magazine, one of whose regular readers believed that wearing the *kudung* did not lower women's status and that it was a religious obligation for Muslim women to wear it (Soeminar 1940). Much later, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)²⁷⁾ also adopted the *kudung* but more tolerantly than did the Islamic reformists. Women in NU believed

21) A length of unstitched cloth worn on the lower part of the body, over the sarong.

22) A shawl covering the head and flowing onto the shoulders.

23) A woman is dragged to hell and carried to heaven by her husband.

24) This says, "Whosoever does a virtuous deed, be it male or female in believing, Allah will surely give them a goodly life."

25) This says, "Whosoever does a virtuous deed, be it male or female in believing, they will be in heaven and they will not be wronged whatsoever."

26) Pious and loyal Muslim women.

27) This organization, whose name means "Revival of Religious Scholars," is an Indonesian Islamic organization founded by Hasyim Asy'ari and Wahab Chasbullah in 1926, based mainly in Java.



Photo 3 How to Wear the *Kudung*

Source: Soeara 'Aisjiah (1938)

that an “open *kudung*” was the rule, and they did not talk about the *jilbab*²⁸⁾ prior to the 1980s (Feillard 1999). Moreover, the adoption of veiling seems to have varied across social classes and across urban and rural settings. This can be seen from Jay’s notes (1963, 79) on the process of differentiation between orthodox and syncretic Islam in Modjokutho, East Java, around the 1960s. He observed that rural female *santri* wore a white headscarf that framed but did not cover the face; urban female *priyayi* and *santri* wore light and colorful scarves only when they went to town or attended upper-class—and therefore syncretic—urban affairs. According to Jay (*ibid.*), the adoption of the headscarf among *santri* and urban upper-class women resulted in the gradual disappearance of the scarf among *abangan*²⁹⁾ communities.

In fact, the *kudung* and the segregation of women in public meetings did not meet with the approval of some Islamic leaders. For example, in a speech at the second convention of the League of Young Muslims (Jong Islamieten Bond, or JIB) in Solo in 1926, Hadji

28) A tighter *kudung*.

29) Nominal Muslims who practice Javanese syncretism.

Agus Salim (1978, 66–71), a prominent Islamic modernist and nationalist, argued that veiling of women and their segregation in public meetings was not an Islamic but an Arabic *adat* or custom. He urged the JIB to free itself from false Arabic *adat* that did not stem from Islamic teachings. Although he opposed veiling and the segregation of women in public meetings, he defended polygamy because he believed the Qur'an allowed it (*ibid.*, 62).

The persistence of polygamy to date is another interesting case in point. For example, the *santri* woman Siti Walidah—Dahlan's wife—could do nothing about her husband's polygamous marriage to four other women (Suratmin 1990, 38).³⁰ Achmad Djajadiningrat, the assistant *wedono* or sub-district officer in Bojonegoro, as cited in Vreede-De Stuers (1960, 104), noted that polygamy was widely practiced among the upper class in Java, including civil servants, *santri*, and merchants. The 1930 census recorded the incidence of polygamy among Javanese and Madurese men at 1.9 per cent, lower than the rate in the outer islands (4 per cent); while among the Minangkabau it stood at 8.7 per cent (*ibid.*).

Polygamy was further endorsed under the Old Order (1945–66), when President Sukarno issued Government Regulation No. 19/1952, which provided government pensions to the multiple widows of polygamous civil servants (Blackburn 2004, 129). In response, women's organizations held divergent positions. While 'Aisyiyah (*ibid.*) and other Islamic women's organizations defended the practice (*Harian Rakjat*, October 14, 1952), Catholic women (*Harian Rakjat*, October 13, 1952) and other women's organizations, including Isteri Sedar, called for its abolition (Tj. T vis Si De 1940). Sukarno's polygamous marriage in 1954 (Blackburn 2004, 130) also served to fuel the public debate on the issue. And last but not least, while *pingitan* was still practiced in Java in the early twentieth century among *santri* and *priyayi*, as Sewojo noted (cited in Vreede-De Stuers 1960, 51), it gradually disappeared following the rise of the Islamic reformist movement in 1912 and the emergence of women's associations that encouraged education for girls.

The interpreters of Islamic religious texts have been predominantly male. For example, in Muhammadiyah, women were rarely included in the Majelis Tarjih (Council on Lawmaking and Development of Islamic Thought, founded in 1927), resulting in 'Aisyiyah's 40th *Muktamar* or Congress in Surabaya in 1978 recommending women's involvement in the Majelis Tarjih (*Suara Muhammadiyah* 1978).³¹ Similarly, in the NU

30) They were Nyai Abdullah, a widow of H. Abdullah who was related to the Yogyakarta court; Nyai Rum, the younger sister of Kyai Munawir in Krapyak, Yogyakarta; Nyai Silihan, daughter of the *Pengulu* M. Syafi'i in Pakualaman, Yogyakarta; and Nyai 'Aisyiyah, younger sister of the *Ajengan Pengulu* in Cianjur, West Java.

31) The 20th *Tarjih Muktamar* in Garut, West Java, in 1976 was attended by women *ulema* (religious scholars); see *Suara Muhammadiyah* (1976).

tradition, interpretations of the divine message by male *kyais* (religious teachers) were prioritized and women's voices were not officially taken into account until 1938 (Blackburn 2008, 88). However, this does not change the fact that they delivered a different discourse and interpretation of the roles and status of Javanese Muslim women compared to the old Javanese-Islamic literature such as *Piwulang Estri* or *Serat Murtasiyah* explored earlier. In turn, the teaching and interpretation of Islam since the early twentieth century—on issues of veiling, women's education, segregation, child marriage, and the still-contentious issue of polygamy—facilitated a closer connection between Javanese women and Islam, leading to a change in perception of the status, rights, and obligations of their modern Islamic-Javanese identity. By conforming to the Islamic-style *kudung*, pious Javanese Muslim women reveal a new identity that remains distinct from their non-pious counterparts and even other non-Muslim Javanese women. The next section elaborates on the new stages Javanese Muslim women went through in trying to consolidate their identity in light of the social challenges of the New Order.

Individual Elevation and Collective Action: Revealing Identity Politics

The position of Javanese women during the New Order (1966–98) was largely influenced by Suharto's iron grip on political Islam in the name of economic development. To consolidate power, Suharto steadily undercut the influence of political parties in the lead-up to the 1971 General Election (Emmerson 1978, 99) and promoted a confederation of functional groups, Golkar. Shortly afterward, in 1973, the New Order government launched the "fuse party" policy, which consolidated four existing Islamic political parties into a single entity called the United Development Party (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan); while the Nationalist, Protestant, and Catholic parties were merged into the Indonesian Democratic Party (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia) (Ricklefs 2001, 361; M. Rusli 1992, 4).

Despite the successful marginalization of Islamic political parties, the New Order policy ironically triggered the rise of pro-democratic Islam beginning in the early 1980s (Hefner 2000, 72). This was inspired by the resurgence of Islam elsewhere in the world, such as in Iran and Pakistan, in the 1970s. One of the pioneers of this cultural movement in Indonesia was Nurcholis Madjid, who proposed *parelisme Islam*, which emphasized the oneness of Indonesia and Islam based on Islamic principles that were universal and inclusive (Nurcholish 1992). Similarly, Abdurrahman Wahid proposed *pribumisasi Islam*, in which Islam complemented Indonesian nation building. This Islamic cultural movement was also promoted by the two biggest Indonesian Islamic organizations, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama. The Muhammadiyah Congress in Ujung Pandang

in 1971 declared no affiliation with political parties.³²⁾ The Nahdlatul Ulama Congress in Situbondo in 1984 declared a return to the “*khittah 1926*”—or a withdrawal from political praxis to strengthen individuals and society toward developing a civic culture as a basis for democracy (M. A. S Hikam 1999, 40). The younger generation of Javanese Muslim women grew up in this sociopolitical context.

This Islamic resurgence was grasped mainly by Muslim students in high schools and universities, particularly in Java, such as at the Bandung Institute of Technology, Indonesia University, Gadjah Mada University, the Education and Teaching Institute, and the Islamic State Institute. Why did Java figure prominently in this development? We must consider the historical and sociological facts that contributed to the rapid socio-political developments in Java. The 1952 figures from Indonesia’s Ministry of Home Affairs show the islands of Java and Madura as the most densely populated areas, a fact that can be attributed to natural factors such as fertile soil and cultivable land, amount of rainfall, and development initiatives by former Dutch administrators (Indonesia, Ministry of Social Affairs, 1954, 11). This situation persists to this day: for example, 63.83 per cent of the Indonesian population lived on the island of Java in 1971, and the number declined only to 60.12 per cent in 2000 (Leo *et al.* 2003, 4). Moreover, the percentage of women in Java was higher, at 59.32 per cent, than that outside Java, which constituted only 40.68 per cent in 1995 (Indonesia, Biro Pusat Statistik 1995, 11). This unequal population distribution is attributed to education, health facilities, and employment opportunities. Javanese women’s better access to education, as a result, can be seen in the percentage of illiterate women aged 10 to 19: while the lowest percentage—4.11 per cent—was in Yogyakarta province, the highest—32.12 per cent—was in West Kalimantan province in 1980 (Indonesia, Biro Pusat Statistik 1989, 102). Javanese women, therefore, had better opportunities to intersect with both progressive and conservative Islamic ideas, through higher learning.

One of the manifestations of the religio-cultural movement was the practice of adopting the veil among high school and university students in Java. Since the late 1980s there have been several studies on the rationale, dynamics, and meaning of veiling in Java. Brenner (1996) studied the gradual adoption of veiling among young Javanese women in universities and Islamic schools in Yogyakarta and Solo since the 1980s and concluded that in Java, the growing adoption of veiling marked not only a historical consciousness but also a path to modernity. Feillard’s (1999) study in the 1990s on veiling among elite women in Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama in Java concluded that while veiling among ‘Aisyiyah was perceived as a pledge to a virtuous life, the traditionalist Islamic NU viewed

32) For more on the concept of the “high politics of Muhammadiyah,” see Amien (1995; 1998).

the veil as a modern fashion accessory. Moreover, based on the dramatic increase in the number of Muslim female students who wore the veil in two prominent universities in Yogyakarta from the 1990s to 2003, Nancy Smith-Hefner's (2007, 389) study concluded that the contemporary phenomenon of veiling among those women reflected a valiant struggle to meld their individual autonomy and modern education with a strong commitment to Islam.

At this point I deliver a different interpretation from Brenner's on the growing adoption of veiling among young Javanese Muslim women since the 1980s. While for Brenner the adoption of the *jilbab* in the 1980s signified a path to modernity involving individual transformation from the past to a modern and religious Islamic Java, this phenomenon can also be seen as an expression of identity politics. In my view, the phenomenon is a consequence of Suharto's strong control over Indonesian women—which springs from his patriarchal Javanese background. Suharto, in fact, styled himself as the “father of development” (*Bapak Pembangunan*) and instigated what Julia Suryakusuma (1996, 96) calls “state *ibuisism*”—a gender ideology that expected complete devotion from all Indonesian women as wives and mothers in developing Indonesia. Borrowing from Ratna Saptari (2000b, 19), who used the term “Java-centric” in addressing Sylvia Tiwon's (2000, 71–73) notion of the centrality of the Javanese ideology of womanhood, the politically active husband (Suharto) and his faithful companion-wife (Tien Suharto) were the bedrock of a stable family as the foundation of a strong state. In line with this, Suharto introduced the new Marriage Law No 1/1974, which promoted monogamy (Blackburn 2004, 130–134) and encouraged the division of labor between husband and wife for all Indonesian families. It is at this stage, I suggest, that the influence of resurgent Islam gave considerable spirit to young Javanese Muslim women to collectively adopt the *jilbab* as early as the 1980s, as an expression of political resistance against the New Order's severe policy on political Islam and the construction of defeated women.

This suggestion that the growing adoption of the *jilbab* among young Javanese Muslim women signifies identity politics is strengthened by the fact that the women's actions were initially opposed by the New Order regime. For example, in Jakarta, under the support of the Indonesian Islamic Students' Association (Pelajar Islam Indonesia), girls began to wear the *jilbab* in school although school principals opposed it (Alwi and Fifrída 2002, 30). In response to the growing adoption of the *jilbab* among high school students, the Director-General for Elementary and Tertiary Education (*Direktur Jenderal Pendidikan Dasar dan Menengah*) issued the Letter of Instruction (*Surat Keputusan*, SK) No. 052/C/Kep/D.82, which ruled on a compulsory national uniform for all school students (*ibid.*). Following this, various *jilbab* confrontations occurred—not only in high schools in Jakarta, Bandung, Bogor, and Surakarta, but also in Sulawesi and Bengkulu—from 1981 to 1989

(*ibid.*, 28–49). Throughout the year, local and national levels of the Indonesian Council of Ulema (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, or MUI), the Indonesian Council for Islamic Propagation (Dewan Dakwah Islam Indonesia), various religious leaders, and lawyers supported the wearing of the *jilbab* in schools, while the Indonesian Department of Education opposed it. In the aftermath of mounting press coverage on *jilbab* confrontations in late 1990, the Director-General for Elementary and Tertiary Education issued SK No. 100/C/Kep/D/ 1991, which permitted individuals to wear special uniforms according to their faith (*ibid.*, 74). Nevertheless, the series of confrontations indicates the New Order's anxiety over the growing adoption of the *jilbab* among young Javanese Muslim students after the 1980s. I suggest the New Order's anxiety was based on the perception that the phenomenon could potentially endanger the domination of the New Order's narrative and gender ideology of politically defeated women, and its general policy to suppress political Islam.

In examining the more recent context, we shall differentiate the above phenomenon with the current trend of *jilbab* adoption among young Indonesian women post-New Order, which, according to Rachmah Ida, has become part of contemporary—indeed stylish—fashion and has little association with the conservatism of the 1980s (Rachmah 2008, 63–65). In understanding that the growing adoption of the *jilbab* after the New Order is not an expression of political interest as a form of silent resistance to the regime, wearing the *jilbab* reflects a different meaning in the context of popular democracy.

Engaging Islam and Playing Identity Politics

Since 1998, Indonesia has undergone a process of democratization signified by structural changes to political systems such as the election system, the introduction of the decentralization policy, and a vibrant atmosphere of civil society. One interesting development has been the rising awareness and attention among female Muslim activists and intellectuals with regard to feminism and gender equality in Islam. One leading Muslim feminist—Siti Musdah Mulia, a researcher at the Indonesian Department of Religious Affairs—has criticized the 1974 Marriage Law and the Compilation of Islamic Law (Kompilasi Hukum Islam, or KHI)³³ since 2004, urging that it be reformed as it no longer meets the spirit of gender equality and violates human rights (Siti 2007, 131–149). In October 2004 Mulia and her friends in the Working Group for Gender Mainstreaming at

33) A special regulation and guidance for Muslim marriages based on Presidential Instruction No. 1/1991.

the Department of Religious Affairs launched the Counter Legal Draft (CLD) to the KHI, which proposed a more equal relationship between husband and wife (Marzuki 2008, 2–4). There were positive and negative responses to the CLD (*ibid.*, 13–17).³⁴ The controversy ended with the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs officially banning the CLD in February 2005 (*ibid.*, 19), which was followed by a *fatwa*—or religious decree—from the MUI on July 29, 2005 stating that pluralism, liberalism, and secularism, as manifested in the CLD, were contradictory to Islamic teachings and thus Muslims were forbidden (*haram*) to follow such ideas (*Kompas Cyber Media*, July 30, 2005).

In the meantime, the debate over women’s leadership hit the ground running when Megawati Sukarnoputri announced her nomination as a female presidential candidate in the first General Election of the democratic era in 1999. Islamic scholars began to look for possible justification for a female presidential candidate. It was the Congress of Indonesian Muslims (November 3–7, 1998) that recommended that the MUI publish a *fatwa* on female leadership, “for temporary women are not allowed to be president” (Sinta 2000, 16). In response to the growing interest over female political leadership, Muhammadiyah and NU both felt the need to address the issue. Since the 1970s Muhammadiyah has been concerned with female leadership (*Suara Muhammadiyah* 1978), which it continued to propagate throughout the 1990s, in the 44th Muhammadiyah Congress in Jakarta in 2000, and in the 45th Muhammadiyah Congress in Malang in July 2005 (*Jawa Pos*, July 2, 2005). Muhammadiyah generally supported female leadership in any position in society as long as it was endorsed by *Adabul Mar’ah Fil Islam* (Pious Women in Islam), an influential book published by Muhammadiyah’s Majlis Tarjih in 1977 (Majlis Tarjih Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah n.d., 56–57). In NU, attention to women’s leadership came quite late, compared to Muhammadiyah. The NU National Meeting in Lombok (1997) issued a decision on NU’s standpoint titled “The Scholars’ Opinion on a Female President (*Pendapat Alim Ulama tentang Presiden Wanita*) No. 004/MN-NU/11/1997.” It stated NU’s support for female roles in social and cultural transformation in the era of globalization (PBNU 1997).

Muslim women in contemporary Java have been surrounded by this progressive Islamic discourse and efforts to support female leadership in politics since 1998. Under

34) Those who supported the effort included: Komnas Perempuan, Fahmina Institute, Lembaga Kajian Agama dan Gender, Rahima, Puan Amal Hayati, Jurnal Perempuan, PSW, Kalyana Mitra, Kapal Perempuan, Solidaritas Perempuan, LBH Apik, Fatayat-NU, Rifka An-Nisa, International Center for Islam and Pluralism, Indonesian Conference on Religion and Peace, the Wahid Institute, Jaringan Islam Liberal, Lakpesdam-NU, and Lembaga Kajian Islam dan Sosial. Opponents of the CLD were radical Islamic organizations such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, Front Pembela Islam, Dewan Dakwah Islam Indonesia, Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia, and Forum Ulama Ummat Islam.



Photo 4 Rustriningsih, Ratna Ani Lestari, Siti Qomariyah, (above);
Rina Iriani, Haeny Relawati Rini Widyastuti (below)

Source: Rustriningsih, Ratna Ani Lestari, Siti Qomariyah, photos courtesy Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi.
Rina Iriani, <http://www.google.co.jp/imglanding?> (December 23, 2008)
Haeny Relawati Rini Widyastuti, <http://www.tokohindonesia.com/ensiklopedi/h/haeny-relawati-rw/index.shtml>. (December 23, 2008)

such sociopolitical change, it is not surprising to see the current trend whereby Javanese Muslim women take a stand in local politics. Here, it is apparent that the force compelling Javanese Muslim women to play a greater role in identity politics grew out of the new political context of progressive Islam and the introduction of direct local head elections in 2005. Today, the percentage of female politicians winning (regent/vice regent/mayor/vice mayor/governor) local elections on the island of Java (West Java, Central Java, and East Java), all of whom are Muslim, is higher (11 women, or 9.91 per cent, in 111 elections) than the percentage of female politicians elected outside of Java (15 pairs or 4.22 per cent in 355 elections) between 2005 and 2008 (Indonesia, Ministry of Home Affairs 2009). Five of the 11 female Muslim leaders who hold key positions as regent are Javanese women from Central and East Java: Rustriningsih, Regent of Kebumen (2000–05, 2005–10) and currently vice governor of Central Java (2008–13); Rina Iriani, Regent of Karanganyar (2002–07, 2008–13); Haeny Relawati Rini Widyastuti, Regent of Tuban (2000–05, 2006–11); Ratna Ani Lestari, Regent of Banyuwangi (2005–10); and Siti

Qomariyah, Regent of Pekalongan (2006–11). Although their social backgrounds vary across the classes of *abangan* (Rustriningsih and Ratna Ani Lestari), *santri* (Siti Qomariyah), and *priyayi* (Haeny Relawati Rini Widyastuti and Rina Iriani), all wear the veil, as shown above.³⁵⁾

While the women's reasons for wearing the veil are sure to vary, we should not ignore the importance of an Islamic identity among Javanese Muslim women in local politics. To be sure, the identity of Javanese Muslim women as exemplified by the veil was not created overnight. Rather, it is a result of the intersection between Javanese women and Islam that began with the Islamization of Java, as I have illustrated throughout this paper. As the reason and meaning behind wearing the veil varies depending on the socio-historical context, perhaps now in contemporary Java wearing the veil is less a signifier of piety for female Javanese Muslim political leaders. Rather, it seems to be a political commodity and part of the code of conduct of these candidates to win the hearts of the predominantly Islamic-based voters of Nahdlatul Ulama, the dominant religious orientation in Java. This is not, however, to deny the fact that some Javanese Muslim women who wear the veil are indeed pious devotees of Islam.

And yet, the rise of Javanese Muslim female leaders in local politics has certainly

35) *Santri* refers to the religious class whose members are devout Muslims. *Priyayi* comprises the Javanese noble class, the white-collar elite rooted in Hindu-Javanese courts and ethics. *Abangan*, *santri*, and *priyayi* are the three cultural types of Javanese Muslims introduced by Clifford Geertz (1960, 7) in his pioneering study in Modjokuto. Geertz's categorization has since provoked debate, questioning the reliability of his findings in contexts other than Modjokuto and in contemporary times.

Regardless of this criticism, I refer to Geertz's categorization as it is a useful analytic tool to understand and define the three Javanese Muslim women leaders I further observe in this paper. For example, although Rustriningsih was born into a Muslim family and is officially Muslim, her life history does not show a strong connection to Islamic traditions, such as the *pesantren* tradition. Thus, I classify Rustriningsih as *abangan*, which is also consistent with her political affiliation to the Indonesian Democratic Party for Struggle (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan), originally an *abangan* or nationalist-based political party. However, after 2004 Rustriningsih's personal orientation changed as she became more pious, undertook the pilgrimage, and donned the veil. This is how Geertz's categorization helps explain Rustriningsih's change from a relatively nominal Muslim (*abangan*) into a more devout Muslim, which I believe is an important factor contributing to her current success in expanding her political support base and acceptability beyond the loyal voters of the nationalist circle.

In the case of Siti Qomariyah, her personal origin from and strong connection to Nahdlatul Ulama *pesantren*, including her consistency in veiling, makes me place her in Geertz's *santri* category as a devout Islamic follower. In the case of Ratna Ani Lestari, although she is Muslim, her life history shows no close encounter with Islamic religious traditions, such as that of the NU *pesantren*, which is the dominant religious orientation in Banyuwangi. Moreover, with the sensitive nature of mixed marriages in Islam, her decision to marry the Hindu Winasa (former Regent of Jembrana) affirms her *abangan* cultural orientation.

been underpinned by strong Islamic legitimacy. According to my interviews with Rustriningsih, Siti Qomariyah, and Ratna Ani Lestari, they found minor religious opposition to female leadership as regents (*bupati*), and when there was any, it was mainly underpinned by political interests.³⁶ Further interviews with, and observation of, prominent NU *kyai* in Kebumen, Pekalongan, and Banyuwangi, where the three female leaders were victorious, generally found no strong Islamic foundation on which to oppose females occupying leadership positions as regents (*bupati*) or governors (*gubernur*), because neither is the highest position in the state, as is the president.³⁷ Therefore, in the fourth phase of the identity formation of Javanese Muslim women, Islam has provided a strong basis for them to be political leaders to meet the challenge of the direct local head elections since 2005.

Conclusion

In this paper I have examined identity formation and the critical phase that saw a change from the culture-based Javanese female identity (the Javanese woman) to a religio-cultural-based identity (the Javanese Muslim woman) in line with the various sociocultural contexts over the centuries.

I shed light on the consequences of “syncretic” Islam, especially among Javanese noblewomen from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, during which Islam was perceived as a hampering rather than a liberating force. And yet, the intersection with Islam among Javanese noblewomen and ordinary women intensified in the early twentieth century following the rise of the Islamic reformist movement and national consciousness. Since then, both Javanese noble and ordinary women gained a better understanding of Islamic knowledge through religious learning that was combined with various ideas about progress, and also largely through several publications, which helped them change their stance from relatively passive objects to active subjects in the learning, criticizing, and implementation of divine Islamic messages. Through the active engagement of Javanese women with Islamic texts, which was seen as a lens for viewing social conditions, we can

36) Interview with Rustriningsih in the office of the Vice Governor of Central Java, Semarang, February 3, 2010; Interview with Siti Qomariyah at the official house of the Regent of Pekalongan, June 21, 2009; Interview with Ratna Ani Lestari in the office of the Regent of Banyuwangi, July 29, 2009.

37) Interviews with Kyai Haji MSKB, Chairman of the Kebumen NU Executive Board (1994–2002), July 28, 2010; Gus TH, Chairman of the Kebumen PKB Advisory Council (2007–13), July 28, 2010; Kyai SB, Chairman of the Pekalongan NU Executive Board (2007–12), June 20, 2009; Kyai MAB, Vice Chairman of Pekalongan PKB (2002–08), June 22, 2010; Kyai MK, Chairman of the Banyuwangi NU Executive Board, August 1, 2009. Their names have been withheld for the sake of confidentiality.

observe the pivotal role of Islam as a new ideology in Java that lent considerable spirit and a means to these women to reach a point of awareness that has enabled them to act as agents of change in their particular cultural setting. Thus, since the early twentieth century, Islam has helped liberate Javanese women from the cultural constraints of Javanese *adat*, the perception of them as defeated women, the practice of *pingitan*, and child marriage, even though polygamy remains a contentious battleground.

This growing religio-cultural consciousness has produced competing discourses among various Islamic groups or elite nationalists, both men and women, that are helping forge the emerging identity of Javanese Muslim women. In addition to these contestations is the practice of wearing the *kudung*, which was gradually adopted across social and geographical landscapes from the 1920s to the 1960s, and which I believe signified the changing identity of Javanese Muslim women. During this stage, I believe Javanese Muslim women wore the *kudung* to reveal their desire to remain distinct—not only from the European progress of the early twentieth century, but also from non-pious Javanese Muslim women and other non-Islamic Javanese women.

The New Order regime gave a rather different meaning to Javanese women's intersection with Islam. In my view, the adoption of the *jilbab* since the 1980s among younger-generation Javanese Muslim women has a distinct meaning that goes well beyond piety *per se*. Instead, it could be interpreted as an expression of identity politics against Suharto's severe policy toward political Islam and the Java-centric social construction of defeated womanhood. In this case Islam as a political ideology, and the resurgence of Islam since the 1970s, provided women with the spirit and means to reveal their political existence.

Of course, the individual reasons for female Javanese Muslim politicians adopting the *kudung* in the lead-up to direct local head elections from 2005 onward warrant deeper investigation. That these women adopt the *kudung* regardless of their social background as they go about their political endeavors indicates a possible "manipulation of Islamic piety" to win voters' hearts and minds in a popular democracy. Perhaps even more important, these findings point to the current relationship between Javanese Muslim women and Islam. This paper shows that Islam as a belief now provides a strong religious foundation for Javanese Muslim women to be local political leaders following the introduction of direct local head elections since 2005. In doing so, Javanese Muslim women are actually expanding their expectations and stretching the boundaries of their identity in contemporary Java in a way that was not possible before the collapse of the New Order.

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