GEERTZ’S TRICHOTOMY OF ABANGAN, SANTRI, AND PRIYAYI
Controversy and Continuity
Ahmad Najib Burhani
ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore; LIPI – Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia | najib27@yahoo.com

Abstract: With the Presidential Decree on Hari Santri Nasional (National Santri Day) in 2015, the debate on Clifford Geertz’ trichotomy of santri-priyayi-abangan reemerges in Indonesian society. This article, first, intends to delineate the meaning of the trichotomy. Second, it summarizes three main critiques of the trichotomy, namely: 1) priyayi is more appropriately included in the category of social class, not religious category; 2) as social identity, abangan was not the term generally accepted by people in that category; 3) the category is not rigid and, in term of religiosity, most of Javanese people were actually in the grey area between santri and abangan. This article then shows that even though the trichotomy has drawn criticism from scholars, it has been accepted as a standard categorization of Indonesian society. The application of this trichotomy was not limited in the study of religion or anthropology, but it has been used in history, politics, economy, and military studies. The new challenges of this concept, i.e. the inclusion of social class or Marxist perspective in studying Java and the divergent of santri in contemporary time, which contributes to the reemergence of the trichotomy with a new spectrum is the last focus of this article.

Keywords: Clifford Geertz, santri, priyayi, abangan, Java, National Santri Day, new santri.

Introduction
The concepts of abangan, santri, and priyayi are three most popular terms to portray and classify Indonesian people in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Commonly attributed to Clifford Geertz, these
concepts are not only used in the discourse on religion and culture, but also in other topics such as economy and politics. Some scholars argue that the relevance of this trichotomy, particularly in politics, is gradually waning or at least decreasing.\(^1\) Furthermore, the dichotomy between santri and abangan has become weaker time by time. However, with the Presidential Decree No. 22 in 2015 on Hari Santri Nasional (National Santri Day) and the emergence of “new santri” --not graduating from traditional system of education-- the debate on the trichotomy found its new relevance and some people even assume that this decree pits the santri against the abangan and would stimulate the old dichotomy.\(^2\) The presidential decree on Hari Santri in 2015 seems to be a further acknowledgement of the impact of Geertz’ study in the construction and engineering of society.

This article, therefore, intends to delineate the meaning of the trichotomy and summarize three main critiques of the trichotomy. This article then argues that even though the trichotomy is considered by some scholars as academically weak, as shown by some critiques, it has been accepted as a standard categorization of Indonesian society. The last part of this article tries to discuss the emergence of “new santri” and hari Santri Nasional in the context of Geertz’s old trichotomy. It delineates the divergent of contemporary santri, deviating from categories and characters made by Geertz in the 1960s.

Geertz’ Conception on Abangan, Santri, and Priyayi

Historically, the concepts of abangan, santri, and priyayi are not popular in Javanese historiography, appearing in neither Javanese sources nor European records until the 1850s.\(^3\) As a form of social

---


categorization, these concepts are not frequently used in written texts until the Dutch missionaries and scholars S.E. Harthoorn and Carel Poensen (1836-1919) pointed out this phenomenon for the first time in 1850s and 1880s. Poensen reports:

... the pesantren and the pilgrimage are continuously spreading a better understanding of the true spirit and essence of the Islam... It is true that formally the religion of the masses is ... Mohammedanism ... but inwardly there are other and older forces still work... the [Javanese] people divide themselves into two classes: the bangsa poetihan and the bangsa abangan (whites and reds). The first group consists of a fairly small number of people ... the other group consists of the vast majority of the people...4

Before Poensen wrote letters about Islam from the country areas of Java in 1886, the Dutch East India Company and the Netherlands Government assumed that the Javanese people were Muslims or Mohammedans. This view became the principal basis of their policy. Poensen, as noted above, reported that Javanese people actually divided themselves into two categories: the bangsa putihan and the bangsa abangan (whites and reds). The former refers to a group of people who considered Islam as their way of life inwardly and outwardly, while the latter refers to the majority of Javanese people who accepted Islam as their formal religion, but their ideas and practices were still guided by another “religion” called Javanism, a combination of religious system of thoughts and actions from, primarily, the ancient Javanese animism, Hinduism/Buddhism, and Islam.5

In 1960, Clifford Geertz popularized the abangan-santri-priyayi trichotomy in his classic book The Religion of Java. On the basis of anthropological research at Pare in East Java, the town to which he gave the pseudonym Modjokuto, in 1950s, Geertz concludes that the belief system of the majority of Javanese people can be divided into three categories, namely, abangan, santri, and priyayi. Geertz says:

Abangan, representing a stress on the animistic aspects of the overall Javanese syncretism and broadly related to the peasant element

---


5 See Poensen, “Letters about Islam”.

in the population; santri, representing a stress on the Islamic aspects of the syncretism and generally related to the trading element (and to certain elements in the peasantry as well); and priyai, stressing the Hinduist aspects and related to the bureaucratic element.6

Geertz mentions three locus of abangan religious life, namely, slametan, spirit beliefs, and the important role of dukun (sorcerer). The slametan (communal feast) has a double function; to make the host feel slamet (happy/content, safe, well ordered, and blessed) and to achieve harmony in society. The slametan portrays “the general abangan ideas of order, their ‘design for living’”.7 On the issue of curing, sorcery, and magic, Geertz says that spirits become determining factors in abangan worldview. Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1902-73), professor of Social Anthropology at Oxford University, in his book, Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande, says that if anything happens in Azande, a place in the southern Sudan, it is explained in terms of witchcraft.8 Among abangan people in Java, Geertz notes that spirit (such as bangsa alus, memedi, gendruwo, lelembut, setan, jim, tuyul, demit, and dayang) is a common term cropping up throughout the whole of their lives. This idea is continually present just below the surface of their daily existence. Everything occurs in society is connected with the idea of spirits. This cosmological system constantly forces them to try to formulate a good relationship with the spirits.

If spirit beliefs, slametans, and the role of dukun—as curer or sorcerer or magician—are the most common pattern of abangan religion, Geertz says, the priyai also has three locus of religious life, namely, etiquette, art, and mysticism. The Javanese use the term rasa for the union of the palace etiquette, the arts, and the mystical practice. According to Geertz, rasa is an Indian concept translated by Javanese as “feeling” and “meaning.” Rasa is considered by Javanese to be a prime foundation “to develop a phenomenological analysis of subjective experience to which everything else can be tied”.9

---

7 Ibid., p. 29.
9 Geertz, The Religion of Java, p. 239.
Insisting on his view that Hinduism and Buddhism play a role as determining components of priyayi religious system, Geertz states that etiquette is a Javanese translation of the Hindu concept of castes. The underlying idea of Javanese etiquette, particularly linguistic etiquette, is to differentiate people on the basis of their social status or rank. Being humble in communicating with people of the same social status or higher, named andap-asor, is the most important aspect of behavior. Furthermore, on the basis of the same conception (Indian castes), which was translated and simplified in a new formulation by Javanese, which differs from its original concept, into a pair concept of alus (refined) and kasar (unrefined), Javanese art was constructed. Court arts are alus, peasant arts are kasar. Originally, according to one of Geertz’s informants, alus is a model of work for people from the Brahman and Satriya castes. Kasar is a model of work of people from Vaisia, Sudra, and Pariah castes. Finally, the main idea of Javanese mysticism, one of the three major foci of priyayi religious life, is a concept of catechism, how people deal with or manage their rasa.

In describing religious pattern of santri variant, Geertz says that this group was, firstly, very concerned with religious doctrine and, secondly, having strong sense of community. Because of these two characteristics, a substantial degree of their religiosity was manifested in the form of education, law, and state. The function of rituals was directed to the maintenance of community. Geertz divides the santri variant into two categories: modernist and traditionalist santri. The former is mainly the Muhammadiyah, whereas the latter is mainly the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). To a certain degree, these two groups have different identities and often opposing each other, their competition or fight is for a single goal; to claim to be the truest Muslim, the most orthodox Islam. These two groups have differences in interpreting religious doctrines and minor dissimilarities in rituals, but both, particularly during the time of Geertz’s fieldwork in the 1950s, were concerned to participate in the implementation of Islamic law and determining nation by participating in the state.

Critique 1: Priyayi as Social Class, Not Religious Category

Geertz’ classification of Javanese society into three variants indicated by the terms we are tracing in this article arouses various critiques from scholars. One set of critiques focus on the concept of priyayi and question whether it is a comparable religious category to
santri and abangan. For Heather Sutherland and Harsja Bachtiar, priyayi is not religious category, but a social class.\textsuperscript{10} The main function of priyayi is a ‘broker’; delivering God messages to his people, mediating culture, and as native ruler for colonial government. In term of religion, “In actuality, priyayi could follow either abangan or santri religio-cultural tradition… their cultural, political and social role were shaped by their essential function of mediator, connecting centers and regions, elites and common people”\textsuperscript{11}

Sutherland reveals that the historical record indicates most of priyayi in Java were santri. She shows that old Javanese kingdoms were using theocratic system and ruled by “priest-king”. Therefore, kings of a certain kingdom were automatically religious leaders at his area. They often claimed to be both a guardian and custodian of religion. One of the king’s titles that was commonly used by most Javanese kings was khalifatullah (God’s representative on earth). Because of hereditary system of aristocracy, current priyayis are descendants of old priyayis. Sutherland mentions that many bureaucrats, regents and administrative official under the Dutch, such as in Kudus, Tuban, and Kendal, claimed to be the descendants of walisanga (nine saints) who brought Islam and then ruled Java, particularly coastal areas.

Underlining Sutherland’s critique, Mitsuo Nakamura also found that Geertz’ concept of priyayi as religious category does not match and fit with his anthropological works.\textsuperscript{12} He was studying the Muhammadiyah, the second largest Islamic movement in Indonesia, which was established in Kauman, a quarter inside the wall of the Javanese kingdom of Yogyakarta, for his doctoral dissertation at Cornell University. The main actors in the Muhammadiyah, including the founders of this modernist movement, have always consisted of priyayi from the Sultanate of Yogyakarta. In this context, contrasting priyayi to santri can be misleading. In Nakamura’s view, being or becoming santri is not deviating from the social status of priyayi.


\textsuperscript{11} Sutherland, “The Priyayi,” p. 57.

The presence of ‘royal key-keepers’ (abdi dalem jurukunci), a subcategory of the court religious officials (abdi dalem santri), as the pivot of local society in Kotagede and as an integral part of the priyayi of the Javanese principalities supports such Indonesian criticism of Geertz. Abdi dalem santri or priyayi santri was not an “anomaly” as a social category nor a term of linguistic “barbarism”, as Geertz has suggested.13

In terms of religiosity, Nakamura agrees with Sutherland that there were abangan-priyayi and santri-priyayi. This is comparable to being either a religious or non-religious person; practicing and non-practicing Muslims. He says, using Marxist terminology, as bourgeois class priyayi can only be contrasted to the proletariat. “The abangan-santri dichotomy is a valid categorization based upon religious differentiation while priyayi is a status category not to be contrasted properly to abangan or santri, but wong cilik, the ‘little people’”.14

Critique 2: From Abangan to Kejawen

In his study on wong Tengger (Tengger people), Robert W. Hefner finds that the term abangan is not an appropriate term to describe the animist variant of belief of the Javanese people, particularly in Tengger area.15 “People of nominal Muslim faith in the region today tend to speak of themselves as Jawa tulen, Jawa asli, kejawen, or any number of other terms that express one’s identification with ‘Javanese-ness’”.16 The term abangan is often perceived by nominal Muslim as a derogatory term. By applying this term, it indicates that they are deficient Muslims and should be the subject of disciplining or re-islamization and purification. For orthodox Muslim, abangan is also used as a pejorative epithet for non-orthodox Muslims. This is the reason why Javanese people prefer to choose the term kejawen than abangan. This term is considered more apt as their religious identity. Another term used by Hefner in his book, Hindu Javanese, in the place of the word abangan is “Javanist Muslim.” This term, for Hefner, has the same meaning as kejawen. “The terms are intended to refer to people who qualify their identification with Islam by insisting on the

13 Ibid., p. 13.
16 Ibid., p. 4ff.
importance of Javanese customs not explicitly sanctioned by more orthodox Muslims”.17

For Hefner, Geertz’ classification assumes that there is a tension and opposition between *abangan* and *santri*. This is understandable because at the time of Geertz’ field research Indonesia was subject to great national political contestation and pressures. Nominal Muslims or *abangan* are close to the PKI (communist party), orthodox Muslims or *santri* were mostly in Masyumi party and the NU party, and *priyayi* were associated with the PNI (nationalist party). The delicate balance of religiosity was shattered by political competition. Geertz’ time frame is different from Hefner’s and brings different political-religious tensions with it. In his field research, Hefner saw that “Javanist Muslims thus quite openly acknowledge their respect for and dependence on Islamic forms of learning and worship, even where, as is so often the case, they also acknowledge their own lack of education in those same forms”.18

Koentjaraningrat, an American-educated Indonesian anthropologist, also has similar objection to Geertz’ concept of *abangan*. For him, the most appropriate categorization of religiosity in Java is by differentiating between *Agama Jawi* and *Agama Islam Santri*. The former is the more syncretistic variant of Javanese Islam and the latter is the more puritan or orthodox form of Javanese Islam. Koentjaraningrat’s classification is based on an assumption that all Javanese people are Muslim. The difference between them, in his system, is in the level of religious association with Islam.

The *Agami Jawi* manifestation of Javanese Islam represents an extensive complex of mystically inclined Hindu-Buddhistic beliefs and concepts, syncretically integrated in an Islamic frame of reference. The *Agami Islam santri* variant of Javanese Islam, however, although not totally deprived of animistic as well as Hindu-Buddhistic elements, is much closer to the formal dogma learnings of Islam19

Quite similar to Koentjaraningrat’s religious classification of Javanese people is the Andrew Beatty’s categorization. He says that contrasting the term of *abangan* to *santri* is not popular in his area of

17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., p. 107.
research in Blambangan, East Java. “Instead there is a more
tendentious distinction between wong Islam, Muslims, and wong Jawa, the
Javanese, implying either the foreignness of Islam, if one is a Javanist,
or the impiety of other Javanese (usually a neighbour), if one is
santri”.20 Furthermore, Beatty explains, this dichotomy does not imply
that these two groups are always in opposition, let alone in eternal
conflict as supposed by reading Geertz’ works. It is often, Beatty
reveals, that these two groups just easily exchange their identity each
other.

In his study on the Sultanate of Yogyakarta, Mark R. Woodward
tried to criticize and modify Geertz’ trichotomy of Javanese society by
proposing a new category: Santri, Islam Java and kejawen. In his book,
Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta, he
sees that Islam is a dominant part of Javanese-ness.21 From the start,
then, his assumption contrasts with Geertz’ view that Islam is just an
element among many elements of Javanese-ness, namely: pre-
Hinduism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Islam influenced only the
surface of Javanese culture. In Geertz’ view, the underlying structure
of the Javanese belief system has remained non-Islamic. From the
sequence and the time span of the presence of those religions in Java,
Geertz argues that the influence of Islam in that island is less than that
of the three religions that came earlier. His argument was that animism
had made a major contribution to the lives of the common people
(abangan), while Hinduism/Buddhism exerted a strong impact on the
way of life of the elite (priyayi).

Woodward finds that the underlying religious structure of Javanese
people is Islamic. Therefore, he does not agree with Geertz’
assumption that abangan has always been hostile to santri. Besides his
rejection the concept of priyayi as religious category, he also rejects the
concept of abangan as a polar opposition to santri. Abangan, for
Woodward, is just a model of Islamic religiosity that does not go far
from normative Islam. “I will refer to the mystical variant of Javanese
Islam (priyayi and abangan) as Islam Jawa and to mystics as kejawen. The

complex of doctrine and ritual associated with the santri population will be referred to as normative Islam or normative piety”.

**Critique 3: No Rigid Boundaries**

The third critique of Geertz’ trichotomy is related to the boundaries and confinement of these three categories of religious structure. Andrew Beatty says that the division of Javanese into abangan, santri, and priyayi is absolutely not rigid and usually there is a middle ground between two extremes, which is often overlooked by scholars. In this middle position, people can easily go beyond boundaries. Beatty says, “They [Javanese people] move between different ‘interpretative paradigms’ – they may, for example, see the ‘same’ illness or misfortune variously in terms of sorcery, germs, fate, or a mystical imbalance”.

In his study of the Blambangan people on the eastern extreme of Java Island, Beatty illustrates how Javanese people from all religious categories blended together in the slametan or feast meal which is called by Geertz as the hearth of Javanese ritual and one of the loci of abangan religious life. In that ritual, Javanese people cannot be put consistently into one of the categories we are examining. For Beatty, in contrast to Geertz, slametan is not symbolic consensus, but it is full of improvisation and fragmentation of meaning. This ritual is full of complex doctrines and teachings. Starting with the lighting of incense, the leader of ritual tells the assembled the purpose of ritual which is an offer to a combination of Javanese gods, Hindu-Buddhist gods, and the Muslim God. He says, “Indeed, as religious orientations, we find all three of Geertz’s variants, and combinations thereof, present in the same event. It is as if the pious trader, the animist farmer and the mystic were seated at the same meal and obliged to talk about the very thing that divides them”.

According to Beatty, in *The Religion of Java* Geertz has realized the existence of the gray area of religiosity and how people in this area blend together in their ritual. However, Geertz does not elaborate this group of people and prefers to discuss the sharp contrast between santri and abangan. Beatty is going further to explain that this middle

---

22 Ibid., p. 2.
24 Ibid., p. 30.
ground is actually the dominant number Javanese religion. He says that the Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia which typically called traditional Muslim, represents this middle ground.

In his review of *The Religion of Java*, Harsja Bachtiar also concludes the division between santri-priyayi-abangan in society was not rigid. Bachtiar challenges Geertz’ assumption that folk tradition is identical with abangan tradition. Slametan, considered by Geertz as a core of abangan tradition, for instance was also done by santri. Bachtiar further states, “the assertion that the peasantry, with the exception of the wealthy peasants, represent the abangan tradition while the wealthy peasants in the village together with the traders in town represents the santri tradition is a simplification which should be regarded as questionable”.25 Bachtiar also mentions that within the priyayi category, there is a group of the santri priyayi and the abangan priyayi.26

**Development of the Concept**

Though Geertz’ trichotomy of Javanese society has been criticized and challenged by many scholars, this social classification has been widely accepted and used as a standard organizing principle in studying Indonesian society. His concept is not only used in religious, anthropological and sociological studies, but also in history and political science.

In politics, the tripartite religious distinction between abangan, santri and priyayi has often been used to identify voters’ behavior and party inclination. In the Indonesian Old Order (1945-1965), priyayi was associated with the PNI (nationalist party), modern-santri with the Masyumi party, traditional-santri with the NU party (Islamic parties), whereas abangan with the PKI (communist party). The Muhammadiyah was “the special member” of the Masyumi and the main supporter of this party. The NU party represented the traditional Muslims who were mostly living in the countryside. In political discourse, the party affiliation of Indonesian voters with their social structure was commonly termed as *politik aliran* (stream politics). “In 1950s Java, these four variants found political expression in aliran, Indonesian for stream or current. In Java, there were four large aliran —PNI, PKI,

---

Masyumi, and NU— representing the priyayi, abangan, modernist, and traditionalist santri variants, respectively.”

In the 1970s, Geertz’ social categorization was used again in politics. Though the political situation was different and the political parties participated in the election were also different from 1950s and 1960s, some political scientist still applied the above-defined concept. As revealed by William Liddle and Saiful Mujani, “Political scientists have used the aliran paradigm to explain the nondemocratic elections of the New Order and the democratic election of 1955. A version of the paradigm formed the consciously chosen basis for Suharto’s forced fusion in 1973 of all Muslim parties into PPP [the United Development Party] and secular nationalist plus Christian parties into PDI [the Indonesian Democratic Party].”

This term emerged again prior to the 1999 national election. Judith Bird, for instance, says that after the fall of Soeharto, the second president who led Indonesia from 1966 to 1998, the stream politics came up again in Indonesian politics. “To meet popular demands for the post-Soeharto era: a less powerful presidency, limited to two terms; a multiparty system that will reflect popular aliran (streams) in Indonesian society and may replace the old government-dominated parties with coalition politics”.

In the 2004 national election, as observed by Anies Baswedan, the stream politics was even more obvious than in 1999. “More than five decades after Indonesia’s first period of experimentation with parliamentary democracy, political polarisation, or aliran politics, retains a significant presence in general elections at the national level...Voters continue to be motivated by their ideological preferences.”

Studies on the Indonesian military is not immune from Geertz’ socio-religious trichotomy. Many observers are struggling to impose this pattern for cleavage in the military. They call devout or pious military personnel as santri-military and, in contrast, use abangan-military for non-devout members of the armed forces. As described by Allan

28 Ibid., p. 836.
A. Samson, for instance, strategic positions in military were usually not given to military personnel with santri background. The bureaucratic in Indonesia military system preferred priyayi or abangan military for strategic position because of nationalistic reasons. Santri military was considered more inclined to Islam than to Indonesia. “The army leadership feels that the santri are injecting religion into politics (thus weakening the ideal of Indonesian nationalism), that they are too exclusivist and intolerant to unite the nation, and that their overriding concern with religion disqualifies them as serious proponents of rapid modernization”.31

Social classifications of the Indonesian economic system also often refers to Geertz’ classification schema. The abangan are the peasants or the lowest class in society. They are mostly living in the countryside. The santri are small traders and entrepreneurs. They are the new middle class or pervanus, in Weber terminology. The priyayi are the old aristocracy, feudal landlords, and bureaucrats. This social cleavage was then use by the PKI (communist party) for their political interest. In analyzing Indonesian communism, Rex Mortimer says, “The PKI succeeded in developing a sufficient degree of class solidarity among the village poor, predominantly those of abangan persuasion, to support fairly extensive campaign on Java, Bali, and, to a less extent, parts of Sumatra”.32 The opponent of the abangan in this case was often pointed out to the santri and priyayi who represented bourgeoisie class.

One Concept, Many Names

The alternative concepts proposed by Hefner (Javanist Islam or kejawen vs. santri), Woodward (kejawen, Islam Jawa, and normative Islam), Beatty (wong Jawa vs. wong Islam), and Koentjaraningrat (agami Jawi and agami Islam santri) in the place of Geertz’ abangan-santri dichotomy, actually all have similar meanings. The purpose for these concepts is to mark the level of religiosity or commitment to Islam among Javanese people, whether they can be aptly classified as nominal Muslim or devout Muslim. Their standard measure for classifying certain people in the dichotomy or trichotomy is the Javanese people’s appreciation for indigenous customs and compliance to Islamic teachings. Geertz’ concept, in Hefner’s view, does not

reflect the identity of the named people.\textsuperscript{33} It represents a certain variant in ideal form, whereas the opposite variant is only derivative from the first. In this context, as a derivative variant from \textit{santri}, \textit{abangan} reflects deficient and inferior form. It is therefore interesting to follow the reason why Geertz names the nominal Muslim as \textit{abangan}.

In the contemporary discourse on Islam in Indonesia, Geertz is often categorized as a scholar of the old-paradigm, often described as scholars who follow orientalist or colonial intellectual traditions. “The Religion of Java is best understood as an elegant restatement and theoretical reformulation of colonial depictions of Islam”.\textsuperscript{34} Geertz considers Islam as having only a superficial impact in Java. Islam is a veneer placed over many elements of Indonesia-ness: pre-Hinduism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Under that perspective, the question is, why does Geertz choose the name for the dominant group, \textit{abangan}, which is a derivative name from the minority group, the \textit{santri}? Is it because the dominant group at that time was culturally and religiously inferior? Geertz is an anthropologist. His work on Java was, of course, done in a particular time and place. When he did his fieldwork in 1950s, the term of \textit{abangan} was closely related to the PKI (Communist party). \textit{Abang} (red) is the color of communism. There was a rationalization of the term \textit{abangan} from a pejorative epithet into a dignified identity. The term \textit{abangan} originally had a negative meaning, but then become an acceptable term and lost its derogatory meaning.

The word \textit{abangan} has a different connotation in the New Order Indonesia, starting with the Communist coup in 1965. \textit{Abangan}, which was previously identified with the PKI, became a frightening term. This is one of the reasons why during Hefner’s anthropological research in Tengger in 1970s and 1980s, people no longer used this term. \textit{Abangan} became a term with a frightening secondary political meaning. As a result, Hefner uses the term Javanist Islam or \textit{kejawen} for nominal Muslim.

Currently, a new meaning of \textit{abangan} has begun to take hold. \textit{Abangan} is not related with being a nominal Muslim, but represents a controversial mystical sect in Islam. It is said that the term \textit{abangan} is derived from the name of a very famous mystic Syeh Siti Jenar, who

\textsuperscript{33} Hefner, \textit{Hindu Javanese}.

has often been called Syeh Lemah Abang. He is a controversial figure of *wali sanga* (nine saints) who brought Islam to Java.\(^{35}\) It is said that this new concept is being constructed to include *abangan* within the boundary of Islam, though it is considered outside of mainstream Islam. In sum, as we see from recent development, the term *abangan* can have many different contextually and geographically-dependent meanings and articulations.

**Marxist Perspective**

When Geertz classifies Javanese people into three distinct categories, *abangan*, *santri*, and *priyayi*, he appears to refer, if indirectly, to the caste system (religious social class system) derived from Hinduism. This is a possible interpretation because Javanese people preserved Hinduistic etiquettes as appeared in the three basic styles of Javanese speech, namely, familiar (*ngoko*), semi-formal (*madya*), and formal (*krami*). Following the idea of the Hindu caste system that classifies people into Brahmins (priests, scholars and teachers), Kshatriya (warriors and rulers), Vaisya (traders and agriculturists), and Sudra (manual workers), Geertz divides the Javanese people into three religious categories. His inclusion of *priyayi* as a religious category then received the most serious criticism.

It seems that it would be more interesting to investigate the system of *priyayi* religiosity and contrast it with a proletarian religiosity using a Marxist perspective. Most of the scholars that have criticized the inclusion of *priyayi* as a religious category, have not also tried to study this variant of Javanese religiosity with the proletarian members of society; they have not brought any class perspective to this discussion. It is, of course, a valid objection to state that *priyayi* religiosity can not be contrasted with either *santri* or *abangan*. *Priyayi* has peculiar religious characteristic which differentiate it from these two variants. This is also not related to the dichotomy of modernist versus traditionalist or urban versus rural. Some *priyayi* has a traditional understanding of religion and some of them have a modern understanding. Some *priyayi* were part of *abangan*, and some of them were part of *santri*. Rex Mortimer has started to deal with this issue.\(^{36}\) He discusses social


\(^{36}\) Mortimer, “Class, Social Cleavage and Indonesian Communism”.
cleavage in Indonesia. Unfortunately, he only talks about the class distinctions between *santri* and *abangan* and does not include the *priyayi* group.

Geertz says that one typical aspect of *priyayi* religious practices is mysticism. This is related to bourgeois religiosity which tries to search for justifications for their wealth and social status. This is in marked contrast with proletarian religiosity which is adopted mostly by the poor element of *abangan* who concentrated on the concept of *Ratu Adil* (the messiah) who can elevate their status and relieve their suffering.

The absence of scholars who try to understand *priyayi* religiosity in term of class structure and economics is probably due to the unsympathetic stance taken by Marxist scholars to the role of religion in social cleavages. The only reason for social cleavage, in classical Marxist terms, is economic conditions. The other possible reason for this aspect of research having been ignored is that this topic is sensitive in Indonesia. After the Communist coup in 1965, anyone and anything related to communism or Marxism became target of the government’s scrutiny.

**New Santri in Contemporary Indonesia**

In the 1950s and 1960s, as identified by Geertz, *santri* was divided into two main categories only: *kolot* (traditionalist) and *moderen* (modernist). With the weakening role of the NU and Muhammadiyah and the growth of new Islamic movements like Jemaah Tarbiyah, Hizbut Tahrir, and Tablighi Jamaah, the old category of Geertz is out of date. Machmudi indicates the emergence of new *santri*, deviating from the characters commonly attached to traditionalist and modernist *santri*. He also indicates some changes in these two old categories of *santri* which make some of them easily blend into one group and have a new identity as “moderate *santri*”. Different from Geertz, Machmudi identifies three groups of current *santri*: convergent, radical, and global. The convergent group is the merge between traditionalist and modernist. The radical is a group of santri who prefer to use revolutionary method in implementing Islam in Indonesia. While

---

global *santri* is those who have more trans-national orientation. Machmudi’s classification is based on doctrinal origin and religious agendas of those *santri*.

This article, however, found more than three groups of *santri* in contemporary Indonesian Islam. Based on their religious characters, activities, and treatment to the world, there are at least six groups of *santri*: traditionalist, modernist, neo-modernist, neo-revivalist, radicalist, and liberal. The definition of traditionalist and modernist is the same as the one described by Geertz and still mostly represented by the NU and Muhammadiyah. Different from Geertz’s identification, however, these groups have abandoned the agenda to change Indonesian into an Islamic state. They also no longer become proponent of the implementation of Islamic shari’a in formal way, although they agree with the implementation of substantive shari’a.

Some of neo-modernist and neo-revivalist *santri* may come from traditionalist and modernist culture. They abandoned the schism or lessened the differences between the two and introduced a new system of teaching through short courses, seminars, and publications. Paramadina, founded by Nurcholish Madjid, is a representative of neo-modernist *santri*, whereas Jemaah Tarbiyah, the embryo of the Justice and Prosperous Party (PKS), can be seen as representative of neo-revivalist. The former is often called substantialist Islam, whereas the latter is scripturalist Islam. Some members of these two groups of *santri* represent a convergence between the NU and Muhammadiyah, but at the same time divergent from these two old organizations. Liberal and radical are two extreme poles of *santri* in the way of understanding and practicing Islam. The Network of Liberal Islam (JIL) is often seen representing the former pole, whereas the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and the Hizbut Tahrir are among representative of the latter pole. There are many factors for this change, among them are, first, globalization or, to be specifically, the flow of people and idea because of the revolution in the information and transportation technology and, second, dynamics of life not dealt with or answered properly by the established Muslim organizations, particularly the NU.

---

40 The defining character shared by all groups of *santri* is the attachment and devotion to Islam. A *santri* is a practicing Muslim.

and Muhammadiyah. As explained by Hefner and Burhani, members of the neo-modernist group were mostly graduated from the system of higher education, i.e. IAIN (State Islamic Institute), established and managed by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs and some of them received doctoral degree from the United States.42

Considering the diversity of santri and their political or religious orientation, two points can be inferred: First, it becomes inappropriate to put them in direct opposition to abangan. Some of them are even more click and fit with abangan understanding of Islam then with other santri. Furthermore, just like santri, the abangan has also experienced some transformations. It is still possible to find naïve-abangan, but it can also be found now self-declared and proud abangan in society. Second, if Geertz’ description of santri is more focused on modernist Muslim and associated with market, in the current context of Hari Santri Nasional, the meaning of santri is is the opposite, it is more closely related traditionalist santri and neglecting other variants of santri.

Conclusion

Geertz has made a genuine and valuable contribution in his identification of the trichotomy of abangan, santri, and priyayi. This division into three conceptual units helps us to uncover and discover certain intractable realities of Javanese society. After he published his book, The Religion of Java, scholars become aware of this structure and pattern which prevails in Indonesia, and most especially in Java. His work made a substantial influence to all subsequent scholarship on Indonesia. Accordingly, post-Geertz scholars can more easily observe and describe various aspects of Java. It is true that before Geertz popularized the concepts, there were some scholars who had been mentioning a dichotomy between kaum putihan or santri and kaum abangan or nominal Muslim. But no one elaborated on this distinction as clearly and meticulously as Geertz did. No scholar called out a tripartite division in Javanese society nor made a strong argument that it is a general portrait of the Javanese people. After Geertz, most scholars studying Indonesian and Malay society — as found in Malaysia,

Singapore, Brunei, the southern Philippines, and southern Thailand -- would apply this trichotomy to analyze various issues in politics, economy, and of course religion.

Numerous critiques have been raised by scholars to challenge Geertz and his three-part division. One of the strongest criticism is related to the inclusion of priyayi in his classification of Javanese religious category, while in fact it is a distinct social class. This becomes the weakest point of Geertz’s theory on Javanese society. It is not surprising, therefore, that Geertz’ trichotomy is commonly reduced into just dichotomy of santri vs. abangan. Furthermore, the dynamic and diversity of Indonesian society has also influenced the validity of the category of santri and abangan. Abangan can no longer be seen as identical with folk culture or village tradition, but it can also be found among merchant and educated people. Santri is even more complicated and diverse. It is not only confined in old categories of traditionalist and modernist, but expanding and developing into more than two variants, including liberal and radical santri. To conclude, after more than sixty years becoming an influential paradigm to read Indonesian society, Geertz’ theory on Javanese religions has come to the time of revision and refinement.

References

Books and Articles


Ahmad Najib Burhani


---------.


---------.


---------.


