



Australian Journal of Islamic Studies

<https://ajis.com.au>

ISSN (online): 2207-4414
Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation
Charles Sturt University CRICOS 00005F
Islamic Sciences and Research Academy of Australia

Book Review

Polarising Javanese Society

Islamic and other visions c. 1830 – 1930

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To cite this article:

Piasente, Jonathon. "Book Review: Polarising Javanese Society." Review of *Polarising Javanese Society: Islamic and other visions c. 1830 – 1930*, by Merle Calvin Ricklefs. *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 5, no. 1 (2020): 88-95.



Published online: 25 June 2020



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BOOK REVIEW: *POLARISING JAVANESE SOCIETY: ISLAMIC AND OTHER VISIONS C. 1830 - 1930*

Jonathon Piasente*

Ricklefs, Merle Calvin. *Polarising Javanese Society: Islamic and Other Visions c. 1830 - 1930*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2007, pp. 297, 978-9971-69-346-6.

Polarising Javanese Society, the second in a series of three volumes, is an historical account on the perceptions and practice of Islam in Java from the early 19th to the early 20th century, and examines the origin of different elements of Javanese society that developed from a more unified culture in Java's past. Merle Calvin Ricklefs¹ separates the book into eight chapters, each dealing with influential aspects of the changing society and religious approaches during the period. The first gives an overview of Islamic beliefs in Java prior to 1830 and is described as a summary of his previous book *Mystic Synthesis in Java*. He then moves to the impact Dutch colonists had on Javanese society. The effects of Islamic reform and divergence is discussed, which is followed by a chapter on nominal or non-practising Muslims. The work and successes of Christian missionaries are highlighted, as are the elite of Java and their changing perception of Islam. Ricklefs concludes by showing how these different elements came to influence political developments and conflict in the early 20th century.

The first chapter, titled "The Javanese Islamic Legacy to c. 1830: The Mystic Synthesis," provides a short summary of the first book in the volume, *Mystic Synthesis in Java*. Of the limited cited evidence in this chapter, Ricklefs uses Muslim gravestones, Javanese manuscripts

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¹ Merle Calvin Ricklefs, who died on 29 December 2019, was an Australian historian and Cornell University PhD graduate who held appointments at the School of Oriental and African Studies (London University), Monash University, the Australian National University, the University of Melbourne and the National University of Singapore. He was a director of the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University and foundation director of the Melbourne Institute of Asian Languages and Societies at the University of Melbourne. He was a scholar of Indonesian – with a specialty in Javanese – history. In addition to English, Ricklefs was proficient in Javanese and Dutch, and his extensive use of primary sources has provided valuable material for historians not familiar with these languages. His contributions to our understanding of Indonesian history are substantial, and in 2001, the Australian Government awarded him the Centenary Medal for "service to Australian society and the humanities in the study of Indonesia," and the Order of Australia in 2017 for "significant service to tertiary education, particularly to Asia and Pacific research and scholarship, and to the development of programs for Indigenous students." See Greg Fealy, "Emeritus Professor Merle Calvin Ricklefs 1943-2019," Asian Studies Association of Australia, February 25, 2020, <http://asaa.asn.au/emeritus-professor-merle-calvin-ricklefs/>; Australian Government, Australian Honours Search Facility, <https://honours.pmc.gov.au/honours/awards/1126257>, <https://honours.pmc.gov.au/honours/awards/1769847>; "Vale Emeritus Professor Merle Ricklefs AM," Monash University, January 9, 2020, <https://www.monash.edu/vale/home/articles/vale-emeritus-professor-merle-ricklefs-am>.

including poems and reports made by Dutch officials. These are used to demonstrate the presence of Muslims at certain times and locations in Java (the earliest dated 1368-69 AD), style of Islam practised and level of religiosity among Javanese commoners and elite.

What the summary does not provide is any indication as to *why* the Javanese converted to Islam. The only reference Ricklefs makes to a motivation for conversion is in the first sentence of the chapter:

The Javanese have long had opportunities to sample new, foreign ways of doing and believing and the imagination to embrace whatever seemed to be of value.²

This oversight is surprising. Islam had no known proselytisers³ and originated in a place geographically distant from Java. The circumstances that led to the Javanese converting in large numbers from Hinduism and Buddhism to Islam are important and the book does not provide a clear explanation or analysis in this regard.

What is made more certain is the style of Islam first adopted by the Javanese. Ricklefs describes this in *Polarising Javanese Society* as the “mystic synthesis”: the Javanese understanding of Sufism. He characterises this synthesis as having three prominent features: “a strong commitment to Islamic identity, widespread observation of the five pillars of faith, and acceptance of local spiritual forces.”⁴ He also demonstrates this synthesis was embraced by both commoners and the elite. While acknowledging limited evidence, he suggests it is reasonable to believe that at this time, Javanese society was unified in its religious identity. The rest of the book deals with how this unification ended.

In the second chapter, titled “Javanese Society’s Nineteenth-century Colonial Context,” Ricklefs primarily draws from a review of colonial Dutch statistics and records of colonial policies to show how Javanese society was impacted by their presence. He discusses famines, outbreaks of epidemics, corruption and exploitation of what had become the Javanese peasantry. He concludes that Dutch colonisation polarised Javanese society into three main parts: the *priyayi* elite (indigenous Javanese officials), a “nascent bourgeoisie of Islamic bent and a peasantry being ground down by colonialism and by their social superiors.”⁵ He stresses these are not simply upper, middle and lower classes, and they are unique social structures that formed as a direct result of the Dutch colonial regime.

The third chapter, “The Diverging Worlds of Pious Islam,” discusses how the once unified mystical synthesis of the Javanese was replaced by several different approaches to Islam. Ricklefs uses the work of several Dutch scholars of the period, mystical Javanese poems (*suluk*s) and the Javanese newspaper *Bramartani*. A fascinating account of Javanese mysticism

² Merle Calvin Ricklefs, *Polarising Javanese Society: Islamic and Other Visions c. 1830-1930* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2007), 1.

³ Raden Abdulkadir Widjojoatmodjo, “Islam in the Netherlands East Indies,” *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (1942): 48.

⁴ Ricklefs, *Polarising Javanese Society*, 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

is provided, largely sourced from a collection of *suluks* compiled and translated into Dutch in 1935 by Dutch scholar P. J. Zoetmulder.⁶

Ricklefs draws upon the observations of missionaries to form a picture of the level of religiosity in Java, providing several accounts of a low level of religious adherence. The work of W. Hoesoo, a Dutch missionary, indicated the first signs of the emergence of a “devout, self-consciously pious group of Javanese” early in the 1850s.⁷ Ricklefs goes on to highlight the different approaches to education and the contrast between Islamic and government schooling. Many Islamic schools in the interior of Java provided only basic rote learning of Arabic and the Qur’ān, and students were not taught Javanese literacy. Dutch scholar L.W.C van den Berg reported in the 1880s that many of these *pésantrens* held Arabic books, yet the teachers had “little or no command of Arabic,”⁸ and “much of what was being taught consisted of magic arts based on the older Javanese traditions.”⁹ This is contrasted with the north coast of Java, where many of the teachers had spent several years in Mecca and therefore spoke Arabic fluently. These schools are reported to have taught students how to recite the Qur’ān while also providing instruction in “Qur’ānic interpretation (*tafsir*), law (*fiqh*), grammar (*nahw*), scholastic theology (*usul al-din*), and Sufism (*tasawwuf*).”¹⁰

Ricklefs draws on Dutch statistics of growing numbers of hajj departures and points out the advent of steam shipping increased the flow of Javanese pilgrims to Mecca. Later in the book, he estimates that Indonesians came to represent 40% of all pilgrims in the years before the 1930s depression.¹¹ It was inevitable that some returning pilgrims would critique the unique Javanese mystic synthesis of Islam and Javanese mysticism, and consequently fundamentalist movements grew along with the number of pilgrims. Ricklefs notes Sufi orders spread throughout the archipelago, which also contributed to the reform movement taking place, although in their own unique fashion. Toward the end of the Javanese and Islamic century, Ricklefs presents evidence of the development of what he terms “messianism.” He goes on to describe pious Javanese in the middle to the end of the 19th century as being polarised into four groups distinguished by their approach to prayer:¹²

1. Mystic synthesis – those who practised “everlasting prayer” and did not see the need to perform their *salat* with ablution.
2. Shari’a oriented – reformers and their following who considered the five daily prayers essential.
3. Sufi – followers of the reformed *tarekats* (Sufi orders) who considered the five daily prayers as important, but also pursued mystical doctrines and gnosis.

⁶ Ibid., 32.

⁷ Ibid., 54.

⁸ Ibid., 71.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 215.

¹² Ibid., 81-82.

4. Messianic – those who adhered to messianic ideas and believed the importance of their prayers was in distinguishing them as those who would be saved during the final cataclysm.

The fourth chapter, “The Birth of the Abangan,” discusses the emergence of a new social group in Java, characterised by their aversion to pious approaches to Islam. Ricklefs uses Clifford Geertz’s anthropological observations made in *The Religion of Java*,¹³ where he divides Javanese society into three variants: the *santri* (pious), the *abangan* (nominal/non-Muslim) and the *priyayi* (administrative elite). Ricklefs subjects these distinctions to historical analysis and, upon researching the term, found that *abangan* did not appear anywhere until the mid-19th century. Using the evidence discussed earlier regarding the prior unified mystic synthesis, Ricklefs concludes this group of non-pious Javanese was a novelty. As he points out, the emergence of fundamentalist reformers is likely to result in a response that is averse to new demands of piety. This is even more likely if they do not accommodate well-established traditions.

One of the main points of this chapter is that the *abangan* were a majority. The evidence Ricklefs uses for this argument is primarily that of Christian missionaries, in particular, Carel Poensen, whom he considered to have held relatively balanced views of Islam and Muslim Javanese. Here Ricklefs takes requisite caution with the use of accounts provided by missionaries with mediocre scholarly ability and obvious bias. He concludes the chapter noting that, while most *abangan* remained nominally Muslim, for the first time a few began to distance themselves from Islam entirely and the first conversions to Christianity took place.

The fifth chapter, “Javanese Christian Communities,” provides an account of the experiences of the first Christian proselytisers in Java. They appear to have experienced difficulty adopting the local language, as they spoke of spending most of their time learning Javanese. Javanese Christians established schools that taught reading and writing of the Javanese and Malay languages, in contrast to many of the Islamic schools of the period. Of the Christian proselytisers, Ricklefs highlights the success of a few, including the Dutch missionary Conrad Laurens Coolen, and Javanese converts Kyai Ibrahim Tunggul Wulung, and Kyai Sadrach Surapranata. Resistance to Christianity was significant despite their best efforts, and Ricklefs estimates Java had roughly 20,000 Christians in total by 1900, under 0.1% of the population.¹⁴ A possible explanation for this is that the Javanese perceived Christianity to be inferior to Islam, yet the reasons for this is inadequately explored. Ricklefs uses Dutch missionary Poensen’s account as the sole explanation of why the Javanese did not wish to convert to Islam.¹⁵ ¹⁶Euro-centrism of this kind is found throughout the book, most noticeably in the inclusion of this chapter and omission of any detailed discussion regarding Java’s Chinese community.

¹³ Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1964), cited in Ricklefs, *Polarising Javanese Society*, 85.

¹⁴ Ricklefs, *Polarising Javanese Society*, 122.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

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In the sixth chapter, “The Elite's New Horizons,” Ricklefs discusses the cultural transformation taking place among the *priyayi* Javanese elite and their increasing detachment from traditional Islam and the rest of Javanese society. Evidence is drawn primarily from the Javanese *Bramartani* newspaper, although several other sources are used, including census data to determine literacy levels. The newspaper provides a wealth of information and Ricklefs highlights several intriguing excerpts. The Javanese elite develop a fascination with European learning shown by their enthusiasm for modern government schools. Ricklefs describes a situation where the pious *putihan* students learn in Arabic script, while the *priyayi* aristocracy become literate in Javanese and Malay, but not Arabic script. This resulted in the existence of two school systems that “were producing students who could literally not write a letter to each other. And whereas religion was central to Islamic schools, it was expressly excluded from the government schools.”¹⁷ Students were in general exclusively male, with only one exception noted, in the opening of a school for girls by the Bupati of Madiun, R. M. Ad. Sasranagara.

Readers of the *Bramartani*, which primarily consisted of the Javanese elite, were enthralled by the scientific advances and education methods of the United States, leading to contempt for the Islamic schools and their students, and an increased acceptance of female education. It is within this context that we find the well-known Raden Ayu Kartini demonstrating the influence that a well-educated woman could have on Javanese society. While for the most part the contrast in the two forms of schooling remained, Ricklefs describes the *Manba' al-'Ulum* school formed in Surakarta in 1905, which was “Islamic and modern in the European style.” The school taught reading of the Qur’ān, Arabic, arithmetic, astronomy, algebra and logic.¹⁸

In chapter seven, titled “Anti-Islamic Reaction: Budi and Buda,” Ricklefs continues his use of the *Bramartani* newspaper and from it highlights a paleontological discovery that prompts renewed interest in Java’s pre-Islamic past. A contributor to the newspaper describes Islam as an epoch, one that replaced the Hindu–Buddhist age, and was predicted by some to be replaced by the arrival of European colonisers. Using correspondence in *Bramartani*, Ricklefs traces these developments, which eventually led to the production of literature promoting criticism of Islam. He highlights three Javanese books written during the 1870s – *Babad Kědhiri*, *Suluk Gatholoco* and *Sěrat Děrmagandhul*. These characterise Java’s pre-Islamic past as being superior, and the “*buda*” (Hindu–Buddhist) religion is associated with “*budi*” or higher knowledge, with a convenient similarity of expression. *Babad Kědhiri* presents a secret history of the arrival of Islam in Indonesia, treachery and trickery by Muslims, and the “tragedy” of Javanese embracing Islam. Ricklefs notes, at the end of the book, the author admits he had “added a few lies in the interest of the elegance of the words, but all of the antiquities that are mentioned above exist.”¹⁹ Throughout *Suluk Gatholoco*, bawdy sexual humour is used to ridicule Islam and *Sěrat Děrmagandhul* essentially brings together the historical revisionism of *Babad Kědhiri* and bawdy ridicule of *Suluk Gatholoco*. Despite their palpable flaws, these literary criticisms of Islam contributed to anti-Islamic sentiment over the coming decades.

¹⁷ Ibid., 154.

¹⁸ Ibid., 174.

¹⁹ Ibid., 189.

In the final chapter, titled “Polarities Politicised, c. 1908-30,” Ricklefs discusses the political developments that were shaped by the emerging conflicting elements of Javanese society. Ricklefs draws on several different sources, moving beyond primarily Dutch scholarship. Essays, books and theses by researchers in universities such as Oxford, Cornell and Leiden are used along with his own textbook on Indonesian history. Ricklefs highlights that, during the early 20th century, educational modernisation was underway, as the Dutch began providing education for Indonesians as part of the Dutch state’s new “ethical” policy. Ricklefs describes the system as inadequate in general, yet influential in the formation of a tiny intellectual elite, which was instrumental in later anti-colonial movements.

For many among the elite, the association with the pre-Islamic era and superior knowledge continued, while other Javanese Muslims began a process of Islamic modernisation. Here they faced a dilemma, as without reform they would be overtaken by modern developments, yet the process of reform necessarily involved a rejection of superstition and pre-Islamic traditions. The first adoption of Islam by the Javanese was likely facilitated at least in part due to Islam’s flexibility and accommodation of mystical Javanese traditions, whereas missionaries struggled to promote Christianity if it involved rejection of these traditions. Consequently, the attempts made by the reformist Muhammadiyah movement to convince the *putihan* community of the need for change initially resulted in conflict, but eventually found considerable success. Ricklefs goes on to provide summaries of the role that organisations such as Taman Siswa, Sarekat Islam and the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) had in further defining distinctions between elements of Javanese society and the bloody conflict that would follow.

The chapter concludes with Ricklefs highlighting that, by the 1930s, Javanese society had become more fragmented than just being divided into *putihan*, *abangan* and *priyayi*:

The *putihan* were divided into Modernists – represented in Java above all by Muhammadiyah – and traditionalists, who created their organisation Nahdlatul Ulama in 1926. *Putihan* were also divided into Sufis and anti-Sufis, and the former were at times conflicted over the acceptability of Tijaniyya.²⁰ Devout proponents of the old mystic synthesis were also to be found, but their views were under challenge from multiple directions. *Priyayi* were divided into those working for the colonial government and, in many cases, sharing the associationist aspirations of many Dutch “ethical” thinkers on the one hand, and those hoping to overthrow colonial rule on the other. *Abangan* were split among the followers of various political and other movements although many *abangan*, of course, chose to follow none.²¹

In the book’s conclusion, Ricklefs revisits his prediction in the preface that “if we understand this history in Java, we might understand something valuable about human societies more generally.”²² Here he draws parallels with this Javanese period and 16th and 17th century Europe, and the violent schism in Christianity that followed Martin Luther’s 95 theses being

²⁰ Ricklefs describes Tijaniyya as “an exclusive (Sufi) order that lacks a spiritual genealogy listing a chain of teachers going back to the Prophet, its eighteenth-century Algerian founder having been instructed in its teachings and practices directly by the Prophet's spirit. Nevertheless, it is now generally recognised as a legitimate (*muktabarah*) tarekat (Sufi mystical order)”. Ibid., 243.

²¹ Ibid., 248.

²² Ibid., xv.

pinned to the door of Wittenberg Church in 1517. He also looks at the Protestant religious reformers that played a role in the wars of England and America – the English Civil War of the 17th century, the American Revolutionary War of the 18th and the American Civil War of the 19th – where “each was preceded and significantly shaped by Protestant religious revivals.”²³ While this comparison is useful, a more salient comparison could have been made with the trends in the rest of the Muslim world. Notwithstanding the unique context and developments in Java, a shift towards conservatism, critique and rejection of Sufism, and polarisation of Muslim societies among secular and religiously educated Muslims was also observed in the Muslim heartlands in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In *Polarising Javanese Society*, Ricklefs provides a rich account of this period of Javanese history, drawing from the considerably extensive research of a wide variety of primary source material. He has done so here with the same thoroughness and care that has resulted in the well-deserved acclaim of his works. As mentioned earlier, the book is mildly Euro-centric, as can be seen in the omission of adequate discussion regarding motives for the initial conversion to Islam and the resistance of the Javanese to the adoption of other religions. A detailed analysis of the Chinese community of Java was also not included. A comparison to trends and transformations taking place elsewhere in the Muslim world was an opportunity missed. Despite these reservations, *Polarising Javanese Society* is a valuable contribution to our understanding of Indonesian history, one which may be better evaluated within the context of the other two volumes in the series.

²³ Ibid., 260.

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