

# The Discursive Identity of Young Indonesian Muslims:

## Islam and Indonesian Nationalism

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### *Abstract*

*The article is a research proposal which is designed to examine the construction of discursive identity of young Indonesian Muslims. It must be emphasised that the identity is formatted by the interplayed discourse of Islam as dominated by the state-backed institutions' perspectives as well as the diverse Muslim organisations' and sects' opinions. In addition, the identity is also contested vis-a-vis the construction of Indonesian nationalism. To become Muslim as well as Indonesian, in some, is a very complicated definition. The formation of the Republic of Indonesia as a secular state challenges the establishment of the Muslim identity.*

*Furthermore, the article is stressed on the diverse Muslims categories on the basis of their social, cultural and political positions, experience and capability to exercise the state and religious authorities. These differences are shaped by in-equal degree of Islamic knowledge and the affiliation and the non-affiliation to particular Muslim organisations, sects or Islamic political parties. Among the Indonesian Muslim youths, the differences are experienced by the diverse education background particularly on the basis of Islamic teachings and practices they received.*

*Lastly, I propose to adopt the Grammar of Identity from Gerd Baumann as a structural approach in analysing the identity construction. Two types of grammar, religious and public/political segmentary/encompassment grammars are designed to examine this discursive formation. To build the grammars, I use a modified Muslim classification from Geertz (Santri, Abangan dan Priyayi) and Kurzman (Revivalist, Liberalist and Customary). Alternatively, I suppose to adopt the inclusivist-exclusivist category from Fatimah Husein in delineate the recent configuration of Indonesian Muslims.*

*Keywords: Indonesian Muslims, Muslim Identities, Indonesian Nationalism*

## **Indonesian Muslims: A Historical Introduction**

Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation. The Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS-Statistics Indonesia) stated that 86% of the Indonesian population of 206,264,595 was declared as Muslim according to the 2000 Census. However, Muslim diversity in Indonesia is qualitatively unique. Although regarded as Indonesia's main religion and embraced by the majority across the country, Islam is not the principle of the state. In other words, Indonesia is not an Islamic state. The state was founded and is governed based on secular principles. Islam plays a more effective role within communities as a way of life that is apparently separated from the state. Mehmet (1990: 20-21) uses the term 'Islamic periphery' in a geographic sense as well as an ethnographic sense to describe the nature of Indonesian Muslims. As Indonesia is geographically situated far away from the

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Islamic heartland of the Arabs, Indonesian Muslims have, for centuries, undergone assimilation and acculturation with various cultures, beliefs, and ideologies. It is this situation which makes Indonesia so different and distinct from all other Muslim countries in the world (Bowen, 2003; Hefner, 2000).

The relationship between Indonesia and Islam has fluctuated over the years. Boland (1982) describes the rise and fall as a process of struggling for existence and influence in modern Indonesia. The formulation of the Indonesian state, including the national principles and the state model, could be seen as the result of negotiation between Muslims and non-Islamic communities or between Muslim leaders and Nationalists; the latter being secular in this country. The compromise that was reached indicates that Indonesia holds various ideologies and religious beliefs that are basically antagonistic (Ramage, 1995). The country's first president, Soekarno, had tried to create a harmonious 'big tent' for various Muslim communities, secular nationalist groups including non-Muslim adherents, the communist party and soldiers (Schwarz, 1994). His experiment failed after several political upheavals including the rise of the Indonesian Islamic state movement, Daarul Islam. Throughout the islands these upheavals occurred as a reaction to the ineffectiveness of Soekarno's government (Boland, 1982) and the exclusion from the Indonesian political system of Masyumi, which was the biggest Muslim party in 1950s-1960s (Hefner, 2000). During the 'New Order' under Soeharto's regime, Islam did not play a central role in the Indonesian political system despite remaining the nation's leading religion (Schwarz, 1994). After Soeharto's regime collapsed in 1998 the situation changed dramatically. Muslims had more opportunities to enter politics, including the establishment of Islamic parties and the promotion of Islamic values in the rules of the state.

Nevertheless, the term 'secular state' might be wrong and misunderstood as a description of Indonesia. Anthony John pointed out that the term was a 'religious state philosophy' (see Schwarz, 1994). This means that although Indonesia was declared as a non-Islamic state, Islam, being adhered to by the majority, influences not only all aspects of everyday life but also the administration of the State. To this extent, interpenetrated relationships between Islam and the state (Ramage, 1995) must be highlighted. In other words, not only do Islamic values contribute highly to the Government's policies but the state also plays a significant role in shaping Muslims' beliefs and practices.

Furthermore, the Indonesian political landscapes are crowded by diverse Islamic parties as well as diverse Islamic organisations. Both parties and organisations have played a prominent role in promoting Islamic values and practices over the society as well as the running of the state. Yet the foundation of two Muslim-like government or government-backed bodies indicates how the State also shapes Muslims' practices. One such body is The Ministry of Religious Affairs, which is dominated by Muslim officials and particularly serves Muslims' religious affairs such as hajj pilgrimages and marriages; the other is *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (MUI), the Council of Indonesian Muslim Clerics. Founded in 1975 (see

MUI, 2007) MUI is backed and financed by the Government and has the religious authority to issue *fatwa* or Islamic legal opinions.

In society, however, Islamic values are not alone in influencing and shaping the cultural and social norms. Islamic syncretism, which blends Islam with other religions and local beliefs, is found across the country. Since before the beginning of the modern era, Indonesia was the place in which a variety of beliefs and ideas lived, competed and coexisted (Hefner, 2000). Buddhism, Hinduism, Animism and the Chinese way of life together with Islamic mysticism were assimilated to create a new variety of Muslim community that qualitatively differs from similar communities in the Middle East. Geertz (1964) concluded that Islam entered Indonesia as an already overcrowded religious landscape; it merely changed the Hindu and Buddhist terms by substituting Arabic names. However, there are some puritan Muslims or *Santri* who try to practice Islam in its original form from the Arabic cultures and throw out all non-Islamic influences. The existence of these various Muslim categories is shaped by differences in the understanding and the practice of Islam in everyday life.

To sum up, the existence and influence of Islam within Indonesian Muslims, particularly in the constitution of their Muslim identity, cannot be analysed solely on the basis of the collective or individual interpretations of Islam within Indonesians or upon how they practice it in everyday life. It must also take into account the interplay and interpenetrating power relationship between the state and the elites of Muslim clerics to shape the mainstream of Indonesian Muslim discourse. The two authorities, the religious authority as played by individually Muslim clerics as well as institutionally by Muslim organisations or Islamic political parties and state-backed authority by Ministry of religious affairs and MUI regularly and accidentally conduct to maintain the mainstream discourse of Islam in the country.

## **Developing Indonesian Muslim Identities**

Primarily, the construction of identity is not only shaped by subjects' interpretations but is also determined by social constraints and the acts of power inequalities within the social world. With reference to Jenkins' (2004: 3-6) explanation of identity as the finding and elaboration of *similarity and difference* or *sameness and differing* (Gingrich 2004: 6), there are two important steps in the identification and identity building, external and internal processes labelled as *social categorisation* and *group identification* (Jenkins, 1997: 80). Social categorisation is related to acts of external definition, labelling, social classification, and exclusion by others through the act of power relations within the whole of society. The internal step or group identification involves two diverged directions between defining and constructing the self or 'subjectification' and imagining or belonging to a particular group. Thus, identification is a process of self-reflection by an individual through the identification and elaboration of the characteristics s/he has; it is also a process of naming a particular and established

social identity by the mirroring and adoption of the same collective awareness (Mead, 1968 cited in Scott and Marshal, 2005). Identity is enacted as ways of seeing and structures of actions of individuals and people in the world (Karner, 2007: 70).

As emphasized by Stuart Hall (1996), the construction of identity, then, is highly determined by the power relations and social structures manifested in discourses and institutions. Discourse itself as introduced by Michel Foucault is considered as the flow of knowledge (Jäger, 2002: 34) which shapes ways of thinking and acting in real life (Cheek, 2004). On the one hand, discourses and institutions influence people's thoughts of their identity as well as how to behave and define their position in the society. On the other hand, linguistic/discursive practices of identity as conducted by people are the basic requirement by which identity is to be constituted in real life.

Thus, the process of identification interrupts two dimensions - the individual mind in how to be and how to act, and the power relation in which s/he exercises or is being exercised (Karner, 2007). Although identity discourse shapes individuals' thoughts and behaviours, identity requires the individual's linguistic/discursive practices to exist. This process indicates the dialectic process of identification between structures and agency.

To a certain degree, identity is not a stable entity that all can simply define and use in everyday life. Jenkins (2004: 74-76) points out that identity is 'becoming' and constructed in our upbringings. Similarly, Hall (1996) states that identity is never completed; it is always a process. Identity is fluid and continuously reinvented, recreated and modified rather than just discovered and then maintained across a period of time (Bauman, 2004). The next generations are unable to sustain their identity without adopting and absorbing both values and materials from wider society. The discourse of identity is not only accepted and practiced as given but also practiced through adaptation and resistance. The process of power relations which shape discourses develops in two ways. It influences all participants from the top down as well as bottom-up, giving them opportunity to resist and finally exercise power, as well as challenging the discourse too. The linguistic/discursive practices of identity are the products of a syncretic and hybrid culture (Karner, 2007) where members of a community live and interact with each other.

The emergence of Muslim identity within Indonesians could be traced in the colonial period as an opposition toward the Dutch colonisers (Federspiel, 2001). In spite of representing the majority population of the country, Indonesian Muslims were construed by the foreign rulers as second class citizens. In other ways, they also constitute their identity by elaborating the similarities in religion and origin including ethnicity, language and destiny. In addition, they categorise and exclude the Dutch as external parties. After Indonesia achieved independence in 1945, the Muslim identity was transformed into a new milieu in which Muslims found themselves in the majority and felt deserving of the position of dominance and privilege. Muslim identity then developed in more sophisticated ways by exercising

the State power. However, the process overlapped and interacted with the wider construction of Indonesian identity which is constituted with plurality in ethnicity, religion and culture.

Following this process, the establishment of the Ministry of Religious affairs and Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI or The council of Indonesian Muslim clerics) supported by diverse Islamic parties and Muslim organizations, demonstrates the interpenetration between Islam and the State. In a nutshell, *Santris* (Geertz's term for more devout Muslims) exercise the state power to establish a legal-religious authority over all Indonesian Muslims. Moreover, various Muslim organisations dominate the construction of Indonesian Muslims by issuing religious opinions either supporting or challenging the State's regulations. Yet this establishment also means that the State attempts to exercise religious authority in order to strengthen its domination and to control Islamic beliefs and practices. The collaboration between *Santri* and the State plays a prominent role in constructing the discourses of Indonesian Muslims.

The rest, being the majority of Customary or common Muslims (*Abangan*) exclude them, becoming powerless to define their Muslim identity among *Santris* and the State. Their lack of knowledge about Islam puts them in the position of having to accept the discourses of Indonesian Muslims. However, following Jenkins' and Hall's concepts of identity as a developing yet never-ending process, Indonesian Muslim identity is not only accepted and practised as it is in linguistic/discursive practice; but can also be modified, added to, ignored and resisted particularly by Customary Muslims.

In analysing the discursive identity among the Indonesian youths, I propose to consider the educational backgrounds which are experienced by the latest generation. The diverse educational experience delineates the Islamic teachings they receive on general weekly basis. These educational backgrounds are identified by four different categories. First, young Muslims who study at an Islamic religious schools or *Pesantren* (Islamic Boarding Schools) whether they state-administrated or private, managed by a traditional administration or a modern administration. The next category consists of youths who enrol in state-public school. In this context, they are only given Islamic religious teaching for two hours a week by Islamic teachers. The third category is adolescents who spend their time in a private-public school that is administrated by Muslim institutions. In these schools, students are given more Islamic religious teaching, but not as much as those who study at Islamic religious school. The final category consists of young Muslims who study at private-public school that are administrated by non-Muslim organizations. Some schools in this category provide Islamic teaching for Muslim students but most of them do not.

Another factor that must be considered is their affiliation with Islamic parties and organisations particularly which have youth-wing organisations. The affiliation provides prominent experience for the youth both to learn Islamic teachings and practices more and to involve in Muslim activities and communities. In a certain degree, the involvement produces self- and collective confidence

among youth Muslims to constitute their religious identity and show it in public space.

The last, both different educational experience and the affiliation and non-affiliation to Islamic parties or organisations culturally and practically define their Muslim identity in everyday life. The sense as a part of Islamic community (*ummah*) by and large is influenced by this definition. To some extent, the definition is either fully- or partly-determined or stand against the mainstream discourse of Indonesian Islam as constructed by the state-backed institutions and Muslim private organisations and sects.

## **Grammar of Indonesian Muslims' Identity**

Here, I propose to use the structural approach of the 'grammars of identity' from Gerd Baumann (2004) to explore the configuration of the Indonesian Muslims' identities. These grammars are used to build a structural framework to examine the discursive formation of Indonesian Muslim identity before finally analysing its practice at the agency level.

Baumann (2004: 19-26) states three structures that are elaborated from three pieces of work: from Said on Orientalism; from Evans-Pritchard on the Nuer tribes and from Dumont on Homo Hierarchicus. On Orientalism, Said explains the binary classification between "*we*" and "*they*" as different and contradictory; each element lying in opposition and with maximum contrast. The Nuer tribal identity was built under the segmentary lineage model as a pyramid of identification. Although the various elements of the Nuer were constantly at war, they shared the same identity and stayed together, particularly when resisting the British conqueror. On Homo Hierarchicus, Dumont describes the encompassment model which is built by adopting or co-opting selected kinds of otherness. The model underlines the fact that although all elements are different, some have a better position and consequently have power over the others. Thus the 'superior' acknowledge that the others are part of the whole despite their differences; the 'inferior' accept and absorb the socio-cultural values of the superior.

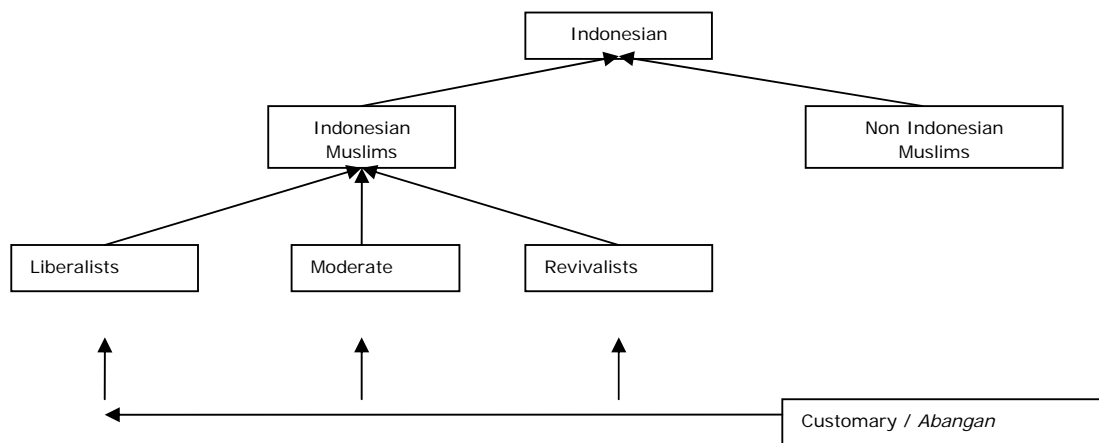
Although Baumann did not mention any variations in his concepts, I propose two combined structures, segmentary and encompassment, with which to build a structural framework of the grammars of Indonesian Muslims' identities. Two grammars are built, one under religious life and one under public/political life where the identities are differently contested. The religious grammar indicates the domination of Islam in the identity construction whereas the political grammar signifies the nationalistic world view among Indonesian Muslims. The two grammars contest Islam and Indonesian nationalism in the construction of Indonesian Muslim youths.

To build this grammar of identity, I use the modified combination of Geertz's (1962) and Kurzman's (1998) classification of Muslims. Although Geertz's classification of Javanese Muslims has been widely criticised, he explicated the genuine ethnographic analysis of Muslim community in the country. While

Kurzman's perspective which emphasised the customary Muslims (culturally Muslims) illuminates the majority of Muslims as the whole. The combination itself provides the comparative analysis of the grammar.

The first grammar is constituted at the level of religious life by centering on Muslims compared with others and in a variance relationship. I combine two types of Baumann's 'grammars of identity', segmentation and encompassment. Segmentation means that all parties are formally equal, allowing 'fusion and fission' (Baumann, 2004: 23) where all parties share the sameness in a higher level although they compete with each other to reach the top. Encompassment works by 'a hierarchical sub-inclusion of others who are thought by a higher level of abstraction to be really 'part of us'' (Baumann and Gingrich, 2004: x).

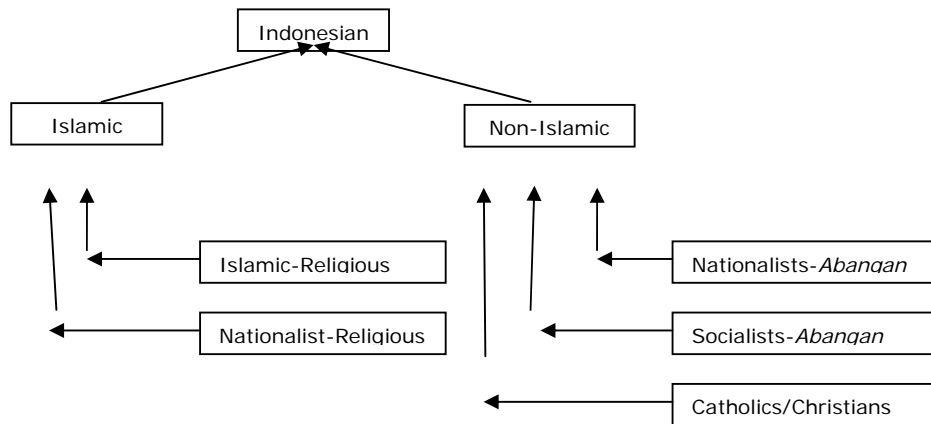
The Indonesian identity is built segmentarily by both Indonesian Muslims and non Indonesian-Muslims. They fight each other to dominate Indonesian culture and identity. The Indonesian Muslims' identity itself is constituted segmentarily by Liberalists, Moderates and Revivalists, thus they encompass Customary Muslims or *Abangan*. These three also struggle to represent both as Indonesian Muslims, influencing the character of Islam within this country while also sharing the identity of *Santris*, the more devout Muslims. Although Customary Muslims are inferior, they are regarded as part of the whole Indonesian Muslim society. This position renders them powerless in the formulation of Indonesian Muslim discourse except to accept and practice it in everyday life.



**Figure 1: The Religious Segmentary/Encompassment Grammar in Indonesia**

The second grammar is derived from public/political life. As in the case of the first grammar, Indonesia is also built segmentarily by Islamic and non-Islamic orientations. While Islamic orientation encompasses both Islamic-Religious and Nationalist-Religious, non-Islamic encompasses Customary/Abangan and non-Muslims/Catholics-Christians. Both Islamic-Religious and Nationalist-Religious orientations are inspired by Islamic values but differ in their implementation in this country. The Islamic-Religious faction intends to Islamise Indonesia particularly by promoting *Sharia* as the legal framework. The Nationalist-Religious faction also intends to Islamise Indonesia, but rather than supporting the

*Shariatization* programme they want to promote Islamic values in playing a more significant role in Indonesia than the mere presence of Islamic symbols and signs. In relation to the first grammar, Revivalists affiliate to the Islamic-Religious while Liberalists and Moderates prefer the Nationalist-Religious. In contrast, non-Islamic orientations deny all Islamic orientations by arguing that Indonesia is not an Islamic state. In Gertz's terms, Customary Muslims or *Abangan* both Nationalist and Socialist stand together with Catholics, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and Animists.



**Figure 2: The Public/Political Segmentary/Encompasment Grammar in Indonesia**

As a structural framework, two types of 'grammar of identity' are used to examine the formation of young Indonesian Muslims' identities. The linguistic/discursive practices of this identity are stimulated in response to mainstream Indonesian Muslim discourses. Simply speaking, their relationship to others, their position in the configuration of Indonesian Muslim society and their preferences for political affiliation will be elaborated in context as a contestation of the discursive formation of identity.

To conclude, in talking about the Indonesian Muslims' attitudes toward the others, Fatimah Husein (2005) used two dichotomous categories: Inclusionist and Exclusionist as the basis classification during the 'new order' era. Inclusionists are characterised by the idea of state-religion separation while the Exclusionists desire the unified state-religious authority of Indonesia. In addition, although it was not quite explicit, Husein also supposed the third category, non-affiliated type of Indonesian Muslims. The non-affiliated Muslims represent a large member of the community which do not belong to particular Muslim organisations, sects as well as political parties. This type is not easily compared to Customary Muslims as understanding and practicing hybrid-Islam with local culture and custom. The non-affiliated Muslims are who prefer to be Muslim independently from diverse religious-political and ideological agenda. I intend to adopt Husein's neutral classification as the alternative to build the Indonesian Muslims' grammar of identity in this research. To some extent, the classification can be expanded by



adding power relation analysis in how each category exercise both religious and state authority to promote its distinctive definition of Islam and Indonesian nationalism.

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