

ISLAM AS A SYMBOLIC COMMODITY

Transmitting and Consuming Islam through Public Sermon in Indonesia

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If you would like to find out what and how are Islamic ideas of the teaching staff of the IAIN Yogyakarta, go to bookshop. Because, in bookshop you will find their books in which they disseminate their ideas. However, if you would like to observe what and how Islamic ideas of the teaching staff of the IAIN Surabaya are, go to mosques; follow them when they go for delivering Friday sermon in those mosques. That is because, through Friday sermon and no others they frequently convey their ideas about Islam.

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Introduction

The emergence of Muslim middle-class has brought about a new kind of enthusiasm and energy for manifesting Islam as the guidance of their daily life, hence new demands for con/textualized knowledge of Islam. One of the main markets for the production and consumption of such knowledge is public preaching. Apparently, the urban Muslim middle-class prefer the knowledge of Islam which matches their intellectual and material-based interests, thus, a more contextualized re/interpretation of Islam has gained more popularity among them. Such a preference has given significant rise to the demand for a new breed of university-based preachers in competition with those from traditional pesantren.

Positing Islam as a symbolic commodity, this paper is an attempt to analyse public preaching as both a cultural and economic exchange in popular religious practices. The paper will

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² The original Indonesian reads: "*Kalau Anda ingin tahu bagaimana pemikiran dosen-dosen IAIN Yogyakarta, pergilah ke toko buku. Karena, di buku-buku itulah mereka menuangkan ide-idenya. Tapi, jika Anda ingin mengetahui bagaimana pemikiran dosen-dosen IAIN Surabaya, pergilah ke masjid; ikutilah mereka ketika pergi berkhotbah jum'at di masjid-masjid. Karena, di khutbah-khutbah itulah mereka lebih kerap menyampaikan ide-idenya tentang Islam.*" This statement, comes from Prof. Dr. Amin Abdullah (a Yogyakarta-based Muslim intellectual), was delivered to postgraduate students of the IAIN Sunan Ampel in 2000.



discuss the political economic contexts of the emergence of these preachers, their socio-economic backgrounds as well as their ideological and cultural aspirations, while highlighting their relations with their consumers and their pesantren fellow preachers through a textual analysis of their sermons. As an object of analysis, this presentation focuses on Friday sermon as it has served as the most charged ritualistic medium of exchange between the preachers and their consumers on Islam and else. Surabaya is selected as the field of the research on the ground that it is an urban, coastal, business city, and is rapidly growing as one of the biggest cities in Indonesia. In this paper I would argue that Islam is transmitted by the preachers and consumed by ordinary Muslims as the instrument to produce and consume the knowledge of Islam through the digest or manual versions. I would further argue that both the preachers and the public Muslims make use of the Friday sermon as the medium for constructing their socio-economic class identity.

Sociological History of the Friday Sermon

The quotation cited in the beginning of this paper indicates the importance of public sermon (*khutbah*), especially Friday sermon (*khutbah Jum`at*), for the production, dissemination and consumption of Islamic teachings for Muslims.³ This is simply because this sermon has to be delivered weekly in every Friday prayer. In general sense, Muslims are obliged to attend this prayer, and to listen to the sermon which is part of the obligatory ritualistic process of the prayer. As a result, Friday prayer represents the biggest occasion in a week for Muslims to gather in a certain place. This weekly prayer occasion is, therefore, very significant for Muslims since it becomes the effective medium for some of them to deliver and disseminate their Islamic ideas, and for some others for listening and consuming those ideas.

Such a quotation also explains that Surabaya has sociologically a materialistic character which makes it different in terms of intellectual dynamic from other cities, such as Yogyakarta. This character results mainly from the sociological fact which follows the locality that Surabaya is a business and coastal city, which may affect the materialistic perception of its population of the world.⁴ Conveying the fact of intellectual dynamic of Islam

³ This signifies the important role of religion as a practical guide of life through interpretation and understanding of it by its common believers. See John R. Bowen, *Muslims through Discourse: Religion and Ritual in Gayo Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Peter G. Riddell, "Perspective on Popular Preaching (1983-98)," in *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World: Transmission and Responses* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 287-315; M. Fischer and M. Abedi, *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Tradition and Postmodernity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

⁴ For comparison between Surabaya and Yogyakarta in terms of sociological character and intellectual-religious dynamic, see H. Moh Bunyamin Yusuf S., "Masyarakat Kelurahan Kedungdoro, Tegalsari, Kodya Surabaya," in M.



in Surabaya in the beginning of the 21st century, such a quotation also demonstrates that the production and consumption of Islamic ideas on the level of ordinary Muslims (broadly defined as those who are not trained in Islamic studies) in Surabaya is not only dominated by the traditional pesantren-based Muslim scholars, but also by university-based scholars, especially from religious kind of IAIN. Hence, in the beginning of the 21st century there is a rising public demand to preachers who have a university background.

The condition of production and consumption of Islamic ideas in the 21st century represents a continuum line of that in the earlier periods. In sociological sense, the social landscape of Friday sermon in Surabaya has changed from its being dominated by the traditional pesantren-based Muslim scholars to the university-based ones. On the one hand, this change of social landscape casts a radical transformation as the intellectual dynamic of Islam in Surabaya which was previously dominated by Muslims who had an academic background from the traditional pesantren is currently under the intellectual activism of university-based Muslim scholars. On the other hand, the change of the social setting of Friday sermon in Surabaya results from the state's de-politicisation of Islam during the early period of New Order (the 1970s) which marginalised Islamic forces from politics,⁵ and which consequently allowed Muslims to place Islam largely in a religious arena. As a consequence, Muslim graduates would rather be more active in *dakwah* (religious predication) activities than in politics, using the *dakwah* as a medium for articulating their political aspiration.⁶

Following also the depoliticisation of Islam is the growing orientation of Muslim activism to intellectual development. An important part of this intellectual development is the large participation of Muslims in higher education, both in Islamic religious based institution, such as IAIN, and in others. As a result of this large participation in higher education, there were an increasing number of Muslim graduates at the end of the 1980s. These Muslim graduates then transformed themselves by attaining nice positions both in bureaucracy and private

Hamdar Arraiyyah and H. Rosehan Anwar (eds), *Siaran Keagamaan di Televisi: Tanggapan Masyarakat di Berbagai Daerah* (Jakarta: Puslitbang Lektur Agama Departemen Agama RI, 2001) 177-190; Muchlis, "Masyarakat Kauman Yogyakarta," in Arraiyyah and Anwar (eds), *Siaran Keagamaan di Televisi*, 67-87; Yasin R. Ansori, "Masyarakat Desa Nogotirto Kabupaten Sleman Yogyakarta," in Arraiyyah and Anwar (eds), *Siaran Keagamaan di Televisi*, 109-133.

⁵ See the discussion of de-politicisation of Islam in the New Order era in M. Nasir Tamara, *Indonesia in the Wake of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Institute of Strategic and International Studies, 1986); Robert W. Hefner, "Islam, State, and Civil Society: ICMI and the Struggle for the Indonesian Middle Class," *Indonesia*, no. 56 (October 1993):1-35.

⁶ This is as stated by M. Natsir, a prominent leader of Masyumi party. See the statement of Natsir in Yusril Ihza Mahendra, "Combining Activism and Intellectualism: The Biography of Mohammad Natsir (1908-1993)," *Studia Islamika*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1995), 129.



sectors. The vertical transformation of Muslims was even more accelerated during the period of the 1990s following the domination of white colour jobs in bureaucracy and private sectors by Muslim graduates who organised themselves in the so-called "Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia" [The Association of All Indonesian Muslim Intelligentsia].⁷ This acceleration can be seen as the starting point of the rise of Muslim middle class at the end of 20th century's Indonesia.

The increasing role of Muslim graduates in bureaucracy and private sectors affected their religious life as they needed religion in a more contextual sense with their new social class. As a practical guidance for their day-to-day life, religion for Muslims from this social stratum should be delivered in such a way that it can contribute to the solving of their problem. At this level, the need to preacher has been changed as Muslim middle class perceived that the traditional pesantren-based Muslim preachers were no longer able to deliver Islamic teachings which are in tune with their needs. As a replacement, they regarded that the university-based Muslim preachers as being capable to deliver Islamic teachings which are in line with their intellectual capacity and material-spiritual needs. As a result, many of Muslim preachers from IAIN have been invited to deliver sermons, especially in Friday prayers in a number of mosques which are organised, for instance, by Bank staff and governmental/public officials.

In short, the rising public demand to the university-based preacher has a historical connection to the revival of *santri* (devout) Muslims as represented by the increasing role of ICMI during the 1990s. This increasing role of ICMI paved the way for the rising role of Muslim middle class in urban cities, as exemplified by those who hold white colour positions such as bankers, businessmen, governmental officials, and private sector-based professionals. In meeting their need to have Islam which can go in line with the urban Middle class, they invite the lecturers from IAIN to give the sermon. This is parallel with the need of lecturers from IAIN, who mostly come from rural areas, to vertically mobilise to the urban city and become the Muslim middle class. As will be discussed below, by delivering the sermon before the Muslim middle class, they expect to increase their status from the preachers for the lower class in rural areas to those for the middle class. As a result, they identify themselves with those Muslim middle class.

⁷ For further discussion on ICMI and the rise of the Muslim middle class see Hefner, "Islam, State, and Civil Society," 1-35.



Making Digestible Version of Islam through Public Sermon

Looking more closely at the characteristics of delivering religious teachings, there exists a number of differences in terms of the production and consumption of religion between Friday preaching and other media of exchange. These characteristics concern three aspects: the way of approaching religion, the level of need to religion, and the orientation of practising religion. The production and consumption of Islamic teachings through Friday sermon approach Islam in a didactic way, perceiving it more as a practical guide for life. This differs from the production and consumption of Islam through other media of exchange, such as class teaching and seminar discussion, which come to view religion more discursively by allowing any questioning of religious stipulation. The reason for the tendency of delivering Islamic teachings through Friday sermon in such a way is "to make Islamic teachings more practical for public Muslims."⁸

The difference in the way of approaching religion as such gives rise to the dissimilarity in understanding the principle of *kemanfaatan* ("beneficiality") of religion for the *ummah* (community of believers). Looking at the messages delivered, the Friday sermon adheres to this principle so strongly that it tends to be more conservative than to be critical-liberal towards the existing tradition. As an empirical experience shows, the audience of Friday sermon tend to be wary about any reform of Islamic thought through reinterpretation or re-understanding. A university-based preacher says, "those present in the Friday prayer are frequently upset with any reforming of religious thought, and hence deliver a rhetoric question if that reforming is beneficial to the *ummah*."⁹ Thus, characteristically, the audience of public sermon understand and consume their religion in a very pragmatic way, and hence hold that the production of Islamic ideas through Friday sermon must have a direct, good impact on practical life of Muslim.

The fact that the audience of Friday sermon adhere to the principle of a direct, good impact is intimately related to the need to religion which represents the second level of differences between the production and consumption of Islam through Friday sermon and others. At this level, the preacher of Friday sermon is highly aware that the audience require the delivery of Islamic teachings to provide them with certainty for their religious practices. "Those who

⁸ Interview with a preacher, Surabaya, 25 May 2005.

⁹ The original Indonesian reads, "*Para jama'ah Jumat sering merasa resah dengan pembaruan-pembaruan pemikiran keagamaan, dan karena itu melontarkan pertanyaan retorik apakah gagasan-gagasan pembaruan itu ada manfaatnya bagi umat.*" Interview with a preacher, Surabaya, 20 May 2005.



attend the Friday sermon, who are basically ordinary people, do not have a pluralist approach [to religion] which allows poly-interpretation of it. What they need is a complete guidance with a high degree of certainty, such as that concerning the way of living in urban-metropolitan city. This way of living is formulated in manuals consisting, for instance, of 1, 2 and 3 steps," a university-based preacher says.¹⁰

Third, concerning the difference in the orientation of practising religion, the production and consumption of Islam through public preaching, such as Friday sermon, tend to be oriented to the fulfilling of practical-psychomotoric need of religion more than to that of intellectual-cognitive. This differs from other models of production and consumption of Islam, such as those implemented in the teaching class, which are aimed at satisfying the intellectual-cognitive need of religion more than to that of practical-psychomotoric.

Based on such differences in the characteristics of production and consumption of Islam, literal-didactic understanding of religion as provided by Friday sermon can be relatively more acceptable to the *ummah* (Muslim community) in general rather than liberal-discursive comprehension which develops in more intellectual forums, such as seminar discussion. The reason is that with its pragmatism in perceiving religion, literal-didactic understanding through Friday sermon can provide the audience of general *ummah* with certainty in comprehending and practising religion. This certainty factor emerges as a result of the fact that the preacher of Friday sermon transforms and transmits this literal-didactic understanding into the audience by formulating Islamic messages as digest teachings (*ajaran siap saji*).

In tune with the level of need of general *ummah* to religion as a digest teaching with a certain degree of certainty, the production of Islamic ideas through Friday sermon is expressed through practical guides as manuals for religious life. The form of manuals as generated by the Friday sermon is frequently absent from the model of production and consumption of Islam through other media of exchange which are more liberal-discursive, such as those applied in teaching class and seminar forum.

¹⁰ The Original Indonesian reads, "Masyarakat umum yang menjadi audiens khutbah tidak bisa berpikir alternatif-alternatif yang membuka kemungkinan sejumlah penafsiran atasnya. Yang mereka inginkan adalah tuntunan yang serba penuh kepastian, seperti cara hidup di masyarakat urban dengan petunjuk manual berupa langkah-langkah yang pasti: 1, 2 dan 3." Interview with a preacher, Surabaya, 20 May 2005.



This is to say that it is the method that matters and makes the production and consumption of Islam through public sermons, such as Friday sermon, differ from those through other media of exchange. This difference in method gives rise in turn to the difference in formulating the message of the production and consumption of Islam. The way the method differs is closely related to the character of the audience. The audience of Friday prayer is more diverse and can be discerned as ordinary in terms of the formal academic training in Islamic studies. This makes the university-based preacher aware of the significance of delivering Islamic teachings in more practical ways by fabricating them as manuals for life. By this way of delivery, Islam can be easily consumed by the audience as its teachings are formulated in digestible version.

More importantly, through a number of characteristics described above, I would like to conclude that there are two broad models in the tradition of production and consumption of Islam within Muslim community: commonalism and intellectualism. While "commonalism" is represented by practices of producing Islam, such as Friday sermon, which involve ordinary people as their audience with characteristics described above, intellectualism is articulated by practices as exclusively expressed by educated people with characteristics explained above. It is a university-based preacher, among others, who is able to implement these two models of production and consumption of Islam, based on the characteristics of audience.

Constructing Social Class Identity through Public Sermon

Why do greater mosques in Surabaya prefer selecting university-based preachers who have an established academic background, such as those from IAIN teaching staff, to seeking from others? The reason is simply related to the class identification as both Muslims as the audience of the Friday sermon and the preacher try to identify themselves respectively as a middle class. The following quotation encapsulates the mutual interest between the audience and the preacher:

There is a difference in public image and financial income between delivering a sermon in traditional villages or lower class of the city and in middle class, such as in mosques of governmental or private sector offices or bank agencies. The reason is very simple. The mosques of governmental or private sector offices or bank agencies are very selective in appointing the preachers. Those who are selected then usually have a nice social reputation, compared to the others, in terms of the rank of preachers. Also, delivering a sermon in the



mosques of those offices can bring money more than in traditional villages. For this reason, we are lucky that we can transform ourselves into a higher class by such a way of preaching.¹¹

Economically, the increasing role of university-based preacher in delivering Islamic teachings in Muslim middle class can be seen as a result of the pragmatic consideration in Islamic transmission. This is simply because the university-based preachers can make money in much easier ways but in a bigger amount than doing other activities, such as writing and publishing articles in either academic journals or mass media. In every sermon, they can make money in a range of Rp. 200,000-500,000. This is a much easier way of making money than writing and publishing articles in academic journal, which is generally free of honorarium, and even in some journals the writers have to pay for the publishing of their works.

The university-based preachers also find the delivery of public sermon easier in terms of the material arrangement than writing for academic journals. The reason is that they can repeatedly deliver the same ideas with the same arguments and language of expression for several occasions of sermons, an issue which is unexceptionally unaccepted in academic writing. As a result, the preachers do not need to make as a complicated preparation as in academic writing, but they can make money in a much easier way but in a more amount. It is in this context that the lecturers of IAIN Surabaya prefer producing their Islamic ideas through preaching in mosques to that through writings, as represented in books or academic journals, as indicated in a quotation by Amin Abdullah in the beginning of this paper.

The increasing activism of IAIN lecturers as preachers is parallel with their social-intellectual capital which mostly has no academic background except from the religious training. As a result, they exploit religious ideas through public sermon to accumulate their own financial capital. "We have no other skills as a capital to live in the metropolitan city than the science of religion," says a preacher who is an IAIN lecturer.¹² It is, therefore, he argues that "what

¹¹ The original Indonesian reads, "*Ada perbedaan dalam citra sosial dan pendapatan ekonomi antara berceramah di kampung-kampung tradisional atau komunitas kelas bawah di kota dengan di komunitas kelas menengah, seperti di masjid-masjid perkantoran pemerintah atau swasta dan bank-bank. Sempel saja, masjid-masjid di kantor pemerintahan atau swasta atau bank-bank sangat selektif dalam memilih penceramah, dan biasanya yang dipilih kemudian memiliki reputasi/kelas tersendiri dalam peta penceramah. Selain itu, pendapatan dari berceramah di kantor-kantor pemerintahan atau bank-bank lebih besar jumlahnya dibanding di kampung-kampung tradisional. Karena itu, kita beruntung karena dengan begitu, kita bisa naik kelas.*" Interview with a preacher, Surabaya, 25 May 2005.

¹² The original Indonesian reads, "*Kita tidak punya keterampilan dan modal yang lain untuk hidup di kota kecuali ilmu agama.*" Interview with a preacher, Surabaya, 25 May 2005.



we can do besides teaching in campus is giving sermons in larger society, notably through Friday sermons."¹³

The university-based preachers use the preaching for Muslim middle class as a medium for identifying their social identity. They make use of the preaching to transform their social class from lower to middle. In the words of Ward Keeler, the preacher as well as the audience attempt "to associate themselves with the status of the modern urban elite."¹⁴ Sociologically, the public preachers which are also IAIN lecturers mostly come from lower class people, migrating from rural to metropolitan areas, such as Surabaya. Using the words of one public preacher from IAIN, preaching in Muslim middle class in Surabaya can be used as "a medium for class acceleration (*sarana naik kelas*) from lower to middle class". Preaching for Muslim middle class, for him, can generate an impact on his social status; people will consider him as a middle class preacher. The impact will differ if he delivers a sermon for Muslim lower class, as people will regard him as a lower class preacher.¹⁵

The character of Surabaya as a coastal and business city is critical to the identifying of social class of public preacher. Economy has a pivotal role in formulating social class as an individual will be regarded as part of a certain class based on his/her personal economic wealth. Preaching for Muslim lower class will indicate that the preacher belongs to this social stratum. On the other hand, preaching over Muslim middle class will help the preachers hasten their social status from the lower to the middle class, both from the perspective of public image and financial income, as suggested above.

Conclusion

As far as the characteristics of public preaching are concerned in comparison with other media of exchange, an understanding can be drawn that there are variants within the model of production and consumption of Islam by Muslims. This variation in the production and consumption of Islam is represented in part by the Friday sermon, as delivered by university-based preachers. More importantly, this variation gives rise to the difference not only, as described above, in the way of Islam being produced and consumed by its believers, but also in the matters concerning economic capital and social class identity. Based on this fact, it can

¹³ The original Indonesian reads, "Yang bisa kita lakukan selain mengajar di kampus ya ceramah-ceramah di masyarakat umum, terutama khutbah-khutbah Jum'at." Interview with a preacher, Surabaya, 25 May 2005.

¹⁴ Ward Keeler, "Style and Authority in Javanese Muslim Sermons," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1998), 165.

¹⁵ Interview with a preacher, Surabaya, 20 May 2005.



be said that Islam has become a symbolic commodity for Muslims both for intellectual and material-based interest realisation. The university-based preachers use Friday sermon as a medium not only for transmitting Islam into the public (Muslim middle class) through the digest version as a realisation of their intellectual-based interest, but also for accumulating their economic capital as well as for transforming themselves into a higher class as a realisation of their material-based interest.

Last but not least, there is a contradictory social feature concerning the realm of public preaching by the teaching staff of IAIN Surabaya. When the Friday comes, you will find it difficult to look for a lecturer of IAIN Surabaya performing Friday prayer in the campus mosque. To make it worse, when the formal-already appointed preacher of Friday prayer gives a notice in the same day of the Friday prayer, being absent from delivering a sermon in the campus mosque, you will find it hard to seek an IAIN-based lecturer to become a substitute preacher. This is because the IAIN lecturers have to go to other greater mosques around Surabaya as they have already been booked for delivering Friday sermons by Surabaya-based mosque committees. This indicates that the demand to university-based preachers is relatively high in urban, metropolitan, coastal city of Surabaya.

