

GEERTZ'S TRICHOTOMY OF ABANGAN, SANTRI, AND PRIYAYI Controversy and Continuity

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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

¹ See Anies R. Baswedan, “Political Islam in Indonesia: Present and Future Trajectory,” *Asian Survey*, 44:5 (2004): pp. 669-690 and Sunny Tanuwidjaja, “Political Islam and Islamic parties in Indonesia: Critically assessing the evidence of Islam’s political decline,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 32:1 (2010): pp. 29–49.

² See Ahmad Fikri, “Muhammadiyah Tolak Hari Santri Nasional,” *Tempo*, Thursday, (15 October 2015), accessed on 20 October 2017 from URL: <http://nasional.tempo.co/read/news/2015/10/15/078709737/muhammadiyah-tolak-hari-santri-nasional> and Din Syamsuddin, “Din Syamsuddin Tolak Hari Santri Nasional,” (16 October 2016), accessed on 20 October 2017 from URL: <http://www.khittah.co/din-syamsuddin-tolak-hari-santri-nasional/1083/>

³ M. C. Ricklefs, *The Seen and Unseen Worlds in Java, 1926-1949: History, Literature and Islam in the Court of Pakubuwana II* (Honolulu: Allen & Unwin and University of Hawai’i Press, 1998).

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 over-all Javanese syncretism and broadly related to the peasant element

⁴ C. Poensen, “Letters about Islam from the Country Areas of Java, 1886,” in *Indonesia. Selected Documents on Colonialism and Nationalism, 1830-1942*. ed. and trans. Christian Lambert Maria Penders. St. Lucia (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1977).

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 *prijaji*, 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 *prijayi* 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

⁶ Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1964), p. 6.

⁷ Ibid., p. 29.

⁸ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

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.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".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 *kehalifatullah* (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.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*.

¹⁰ See Heather Sutherland, "The Priyayi," *Indonesia*, Vol. 19 (April 1975), pp. 57-77 and Harsja W. Bachtiar, "The Religion of Java: A Commentary," in *Readings on Islam in Southeast Asia*, compiled by Ahmad Ibrahim, Sharon Siddique, and Yasmin Hussain (Singapore: ISEAS, 1985).

¹¹ Sutherland, "The Priyayi," p. 57.

¹² Mitsuo Nakamura, *The Crescent Arises over the Banyan Tree: A Study of the Muhammadiyah Movement in a Central Javanese Town* (Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 1983).

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* officialdom 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.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 12-13.

¹⁵ Robert W. Hefner, *Hindu Javanese: Tengger Tradition and Islam* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985).

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 *Agama 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 *Agama 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.

¹⁹ Koentjaraningrat, *Javanese Culture* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 317-318.

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 Jawa* 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

²⁰ Andrew Beatty, *Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 126.

²¹ Mark R. Woodward, *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989).

complex of doctrine and ritual associated with the *santri* population will be referred to as normative Islam or normative piety”.²²

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”.²³

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”.²⁴

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.

²³ Beatty, *Varieties of Javanese Religion*, p. 4.

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,

²⁵ Bachtiar, "The Religion of Java", p. 281.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 284-285.

Masyumi, and NU— representing the *priyayi*, *abangan*, modernist, and traditionalist *santri* variants, respectively”.²⁷

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]”.²⁸

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”.²⁹ 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”.³⁰

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

²⁷ R. William Liddle and Saiful Mujani, “Leadership, Party, and Religion: Explaining Voting Behavior in Indonesia,” *Comparative Political Studies*, 40:7 (2007), p. 836.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 836.

²⁹ Judith Bird, “Indonesia in 1998: The Pot Boils Over,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 39: 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1999), p. 31.

³⁰ Anies R. Baswedan, “Indonesian Politics in 2007: The Presidency, Local Elections and the Future of Democracy,” *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, 43:3 (2007), p. 339.

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

³¹ Allan A. Samson, "Army and Islam in Indonesia," *Pacific Affairs*, 44: (1972), p. 248.

³² Rex. Mortimer, "Class, Social Cleavage and Indonesian Communism," *Indonesia*, 8 (Oct. 1969), p. 18.

reflect the identity of the named people.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 *santri*, *abangan* reflects deficient and inferior form. It is therefore interesting to follow the reason why Geertz names the nominal Muslim as *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”.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, *abangan*, which is a derivative name from the minority group, the *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 *abangan* was closely related to the PKI (Communist party). *Abang* (red) is the color of communism. There was a rationalization of the term *abangan* from a pejorative epithet into a dignified identity. The term *abangan* originally had a negative meaning, but then become an acceptable term and lost its derogatory meaning.

The word *abangan* has a different connotation in the New Order Indonesia, starting with the Communist coup in 1965. *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. *Abangan* became a term with a frightening secondary political meaning. As a result, Hefner uses the term Javanist Islam or *kejawen* for nominal Muslim.

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

³³ Hefner, *Hindu Javanese*.

³⁴ Mark R. Woodward, “Talking Across Paradigms: Indonesia, Islam, and Orientalism,” in Mark R. Woodward (ed.), *Toward a New Paradigm: recent Developments in Indonesian Islamic Thought* (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona State University, 1996), p. 31.

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 (*kerami*). 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

³⁵ A.G. Muhaimin, "The Islamic Traditions of Cirebon: *Ibadat* and *Adat* Among Javanese Muslims," Unpublished PhD Thesis, The Australian National University, Canberra, 1995.

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).³⁷ With the weakening role of the NU and Muhammadiyah and the growth of new Islamic movements like Jemaah Tarbiyah, Hizbut Tahrir, and Tablighi Jemaah, the old category of Geertz is out of date.³⁸ Machmudi indicates the emergence of new *santri*, deviating from the characters commonly attached to traditionalist and modernist *santri*.³⁹ 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

³⁷ Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, p. 129.

³⁸ Ahmad Najib Burhani, “Aksi Bela Islam: Konservatisme dan Fragmentasi Otoritas Keagamaan,” *Jurnal Maarif*, 11:2 (December 2017): pp. 15-29.

³⁹ Yon Machmudi, “The Emergence of New Santri in Indonesia,” *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, 2:1 (2008): pp. 69-102.

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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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.

⁴¹ Ahmad Najib Burhani, "Kitab Kuning dan Kitab Suci: Membaca al-Jabiri dengan perspektif NU dan Muhammadiyah," *Jurnal Masyarakat Indonesia*, Vol 41:1 (Juni 2015): pp. 29-42

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 than 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 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,

⁴² See Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000) and Ahmad Najib Burhani, "Transmission of Islamic Reform from the United States to Indonesia: Studying Fazlur Rahman's Legacy through the Works of Ahmad Syafii Maarif," *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 41:119 (2013): pp. 29-47.

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. []

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