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Islamisation and Its Opponents in Java

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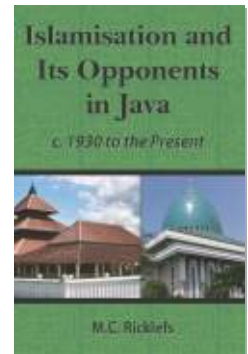
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Preface

This is the final volume in a series concerning the history of the Islamisation of the Javanese people. Beliefs — or disbeliefs — about the supernatural are important in any society, so this series seeks to address questions that are not about the Javanese alone. The first of these books was *Mystic synthesis in Java: A history of Islamisation from the fourteenth to the early nineteenth centuries* (2006) and the second *Polarising Javanese society: Islamic and other visions c. 1830–1930* (2007); both of these are summarised briefly in the first chapter here. These two and the present book focus in large part on the connection between what people believe and what they do. Much is about religion and politics, about the relationship between two forms of authority, knowledge and power and those who wield them. Pursuing the broader issues, I have drawn comparisons with other societies and times in these books, and the final chapter in this volume considers some broad, I think universal, topics.

There is something of a writing tradition that regards the Javanese as mystically exotic, as somehow not quite like anybody else. Colonial-era literature is full of such mythologising and stereotyping. In those days, the Dutch sometimes called the Javanese ‘the gentlest people of the earth’ and some modern writers have succumbed to a similar temptation to romanticise them, to see Javanese as the people of an ageless land of ‘magic and mystics’ (the title of a 1974 book by the traveller Nina Epton). The Javanese have just seemed so ‘Eastern’. An absurd consequence of this was the title of a film released in 1969 about the eruption of Mount Krakatau in 1883, called ‘Kakatoa: East of Java’. Krakatau is actually west of Java, but evidently only ‘east’ was exotic enough.

I recognise that it is still possible to romanticise Java. One evening in 2006 I was talking with the idiosyncratic *kyai* Mbah Lim at his religious school near Klaten. With the sun going down and rain gathering, a breeze blew up across the rice fields and came through the open front area of the house where we were sitting, with frog and other evening noises rising — a reminder of how beguiling the Javanese countryside can be at the end of a hot day.

But this is not a book about romance or exoticism, and the Javanese experience is no less a part of the universal human experience than anybody else's. As one of Salman Rushdie's characters puts it, 'The curse of the human race is not that we are so different from one another, but that we are so alike'.¹

It may be worth briefly reminding ourselves of the scale of significance of this Javanese story. The ethnic Javanese total about 100 million people — about 40 per cent of Indonesia's total population approaching 250 million.² Indonesia is the fourth largest nation in the world, the world's largest Muslim-majority nation and its third largest democracy. The island of Java hosts not only the national capital Jakarta and the vast conurbation that surrounds it — with all of the political, cultural, social and economic significance that brings³ — but also several other important cities of Indonesia. In the Javanese-speaking heartland of Central and East Java are found Surabaya, Semarang, Malang and the venerable cultural centres of Surakarta and Yogyakarta. Outside those cities, from the coasts to the mountain ranges, are found small towns and smaller villages where millions of Javanese seek to improve their lives and those of their neighbours, loved ones and descendants. The political, social, cultural and religious transformations that we are about to chart are no small-scale matters.

I hope that by the time you have reached the end of this rather large book, you will be persuaded that the history presented here tells us some important things about how human societies change, in particular about the interaction between religion and politics and the links between what people believe and what, as a consequence, they do.

M.C. Ricklefs
Singapore, 2012

¹ Salman Rushdie, *The enchantress of Florence: A novel* (London: Vintage Books, 2009), p. 392.

² Based on estimates in the online CIA World Factbook, at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/id.html>.

³ Jakarta and West Java are the subject of a forthcoming study by my colleague Chaider Saleh Bamualim, tentatively entitled *Islamisation and resistance in West Java: A study of religion, politics and social change since c. 1965*.