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Heritage of Nusantara specializes in religious studies in the field of literature either contemporarily or classically and heritage located in Southeast Asia. This journal warmly welcomes contributions from scholars of related disciplines.

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MODERN GNOSTICS: THE PURSUIT OF THE SACRED IN INDONESIAN ISLAM

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Abstract

This paper reports on an ongoing research project on “New Southeast Asian Spiritualities” and offers a preliminary analysis of new Muslim religiosities in the Jakarta metropolitan area (Jabodetabek). Most of the analyses of the processes of “Islamization” in places like Indonesia and Malaysia in the last few decades focus on a particular set of social cum political agendas: the imposition of sharia law, the Islamization of the state apparatus, the increased emphasis on the external markers of ‘Islamic identity’ and the like. Yet, there appears to be an equally significant, even sometimes opposing, tendency among Southeast Asian Muslims that involves them in seeking out more intense and personalised ‘inner’ forms of religious experience, a process with parallels elsewhere in the world. In the paper, I discuss examples of this tendency based on fieldwork in the greater Jakarta area, and ask about its implications for current understandings of the consequences (for democracy, secularism, human rights, gender relations, etc.) of Islamization in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: spirituality, Islamization, Indonesia, Jakarta, Islamic identity

Abstrak

Tulisan ini melaporkan hasil penelitian yang sedang berjalan tentang “New Southeast Asian Spiritualities” dan menawarkan analisis awal tentang keagamaan orang Islam yang baru di Jakarta (Jabodetabek). Kebanyakan analisa tentang Islamisasi seperti di Indonesia dan di Malaysia dalam beberapa dekade terakhir memokus pada agenda sosial dan politik; perpajakan tentang hukum syariah, islamisasi aparatur negara, meningkatnya penekanan pada penanda luar “identitas Islam” dan sebagainya. Namun demikian, di sana muncul persamaan dan kadang-kadang penolakan, kecenderungan pada orang Muslim Asia Tenggara bahwa keterlibatan mereka dalam mencari pengalaman agama dari dalam jiwa, sebuah proses yang paralel di sisi lain di dunia ini. Dalam tulisan ini, saya mendiskusikan contoh kecenderungan ini berdasarkan studi lapangan di Jakarta dan tentang implikasinya untuk konsekwensi pemahaman sekarang (untuk demokrasi, sekularisme, hak asasi manusia, hubungan jender, dan sebagainya) dari islamisasi di Asia Tenggara.

Kata kunci: *spiritualitas, Islamisasi, Indonesia, Jakarta, identitas Islam*

Islamization in Indonesia

I want to introduce this discussion of new Muslim spiritualities with some general observations about the process of Islamization that is said to have taken place in Muslim Southeast Asia (mainly Malaysia and Indonesia, but also to some extent also in Vietnam, Thailand and Singapore) in recent decades. Here, I focus mainly on the changing face of Islam in Indonesia, even though, after carrying out research in Indonesia (West Sumatra) in the 1970s, most of my subsequent research has been in Malaysia. Only recently have I begun working on Indonesia again, beginning with the research in the Jakarta metropolitan area (Jabodetabek) discussed in the second part of the paper.¹

As a number of researchers have argued, a process of religious transformation that they have typically labelled ‘Islamization’ has taken place in Indonesia, as well as other parts of Muslim Southeast Asia, over the last few decades, a process that has had a significant impact on the social, political and religious lives of Muslims (as well as non-Muslims) in the region. With its origins in the so-called *dakwah* movements that sprang up in the early to mid-1970s, the project of Islamization in Malaysia has generated a good deal of concern, a fact reflected in the large amount of attention that it has

received from academic researchers. But while no doubt the case of Malaysia is somewhat distinctive, due largely to the pivotal role played by the Malaysian state in promoting it, similar changes have also been taking place elsewhere in Muslim Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia.

Put most simply, Islamization could be taken to refer to the effort on the part of groups and/or individuals to become somehow “more Islamic”. But what might ‘more Islamic’ really mean and what would actually be involved in becoming so? To answer these questions, it makes sense to begin with the way the term is used in existing analyses of the process of religious transformation in Muslim Southeast Asia. And here it must be said that the label has most often been used by western observers, as well as self-identified liberals, secularists, feminists and/or modernists in Southeast itself, for whom a particular set religious changes are seen as threatening democracy, gender equality, human rights, and relations between (as well as within) religious communities in the region. What are these changes? Is the concept of Islamization a useful way of describing them? And how accurate a description of the changing face of Islam in places like Indonesia is it?

While the term is often applied rather loosely in studies of religious change in places like Malaysia and Indonesia, in a recent book, Merle Ricklefs², a leading western historian of Indonesia, provides a more careful account. Here Ricklefs is concerned to demonstrate that:

- a. A *process* of Islamization has taken place on Java in the years since 1998 and has now reached *unprecedented* levels;
- b. Islamization is the outgrowth of the interpretations, agendas and activities of a particular group of *agents*, which he labels, variously, as “revivalist”, “Islamist” and ‘Dakwahist’;
- c. The process is ‘almost certainly’ *irreversible* due to the attitudes and actions (or lack of action) on the part of a second set of agents, namely the political elites;

- d. Islamization is, on the whole, *a bad thing* because of its undesirable consequences for the Indonesian polity, and the Indonesian people more broadly.

In this impressively documented book, Ricklefs discusses the empirical, analytic and more philosophical-normative facets of the process of Islamization. There is space here only for a brief summary of the main components of the argument:

1. *Islamization as Process*

Ricklefs uses the term primarily to describe a process of religious transformation that has involved: significant increases in levels of Islamic religiosity, and Islamic identity and identification; expansion of the role played by Islam in party politics (including non-religious parties); the spread of compulsory religious education in public and private schools; government promotion of piety and prayer; the Islamization of the police force; the increased prevalence of Islam in student politics; an expanded influence of religious elites on government despite the fact that they have no, or very limited, constitutional powers; greater visibility of Islamic themes in popular culture; the increased prevalence of ‘Islamic’ dress (particularly for women); the rise of Islamic practices in business and banking; the ‘persistence’ of Islamic ‘superstition’; and the rise to prominence of ‘Islamic’ science (Ricklefs calls it ‘junk science’) in the years, all in the years since the fall of Suharto’s New Order regime. A result of this drive towards greater Islamization, according to Ricklefs, has been to put other Islamic “voices” (notably those of Nahdlatul Ulama [NU] ‘traditionalists’, Muhammadiyah ‘modernists’, and the practitioners of what he calls ‘older cultural styles’) on the defensive.

2 & 3. *Agents of Islamization*

The second part of the argument concerns the two sets of agents who, according to Ricklefs, have driven, and are driving, the Islamization process. The argument that Islamization has reached what Ricklefs calls a “decisive stage” such that the “deepening Islamization of the Javanese is [now] incapable of being reversed”, depends in part on his assessment that there has been a significant

weakening of opposition to it and, more importantly, on the fact that “political elites [now] allow religious elites, organisations and issues to dominate the public realm, policy making and state conduct”. The result is that it is now “difficult to imagine that the deepening influence of Islam among Javanese can be stopped or reversed by any remaining opponent”. Whether out of conviction, a fear of being branded unislamic, a desire to pander to the electorate, or a general unwillingness to do anything at all, the government has at least permitted the process of Islamization to proceed apace, if not actually itself promoted it, for example by acquiescing to *fatwā* issued by the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Indonesian Ulama Council – MUI), a national advisory body of prominent Muslim scholars and teachers established by then President Suharto in 1975, even though these are in no way legally binding, or at least by ‘looking the other way’ when groups pushing for Islamization take action.

The second group of agents or Islamizers –Ricklefs calls them, variously, ‘Islamists’, ‘Dakwahists’ and ‘Revivalists’ (not always clearly defined and distinguished)– consists of those whose objective is “to shut off voices, lifestyles and ideas other than their own, to close the public space to them and to prevent them winning a wider audience” (Ricklefs 2012: 408). Although more might be said about the rather surprising lack of terminological precision here, suffice it to say that he is not referring primarily to terrorist groups and networks (he has a few well-chosen words of criticism for the whole field of ‘terrorism studies’), although there is nonetheless quite a lot of discussion of Abu Bakar Ba’asyir and other less prominent extremist figures. But Ricklefs maintains that terrorism is more or less under control, and in any case that terrorists have little significant influence if only because they are viewed as a threat by a middle class that, while perhaps receptive to some of their goals, are alienated by the threat such actions pose to their own lifestyles. Instead the discussion of the agents of Islamization is focussed on what he calls the two ‘Dakwahist’ and ‘Islamist’ political parties –Hizbul Tahrir and Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS)– as well as on Islamic pressure groups like the Front Pembela Islam (FPI).

4. *The Normative Implications of Islamization*

The fourth part of the argument runs through most of the book, but remains largely implicit until the final chapter. Here it becomes clear that for Ricklefs, the unprecedented level of Islamization on Java is in essence a *bad thing* because it is likely to have undesirable consequences for the Indonesian polity and for the Indonesian people as a whole. In this final chapter, he elaborates on this assessment by arguing that Islamization brings with it the dominance of a particular “political philosophy” (derived from Plato), which is oriented towards the “search for justice” rather than a “search for freedom”. And such a philosophy, Ricklefs argues, is inherently totalitarian.

In this Ricklefs can be seen to be adopting a position on the (proper) role of religion in the modern polity that, I would argue, is broadly shared by most self-styled liberal and/or modernist analysts. This stance takes one of two forms: a strong form characterised by a general hostility to religion *tout court* and a weak form involving the contention that religious values, beliefs and practices should be confined to a so-called ‘private sphere’ (or even the ‘sphere’ of the individual believer).

The above is an admittedly abbreviated summary of just one recent account of Islamization in only one part of Muslim Southeast Asia, albeit a particularly scholarly and meticulously documented one. However, rather than broadening the discussion, I propose instead simply to treat Ricklefs as representative of a broader current of argument and critique, and raise a number of questions based on ongoing research in the satellite town of Depok in the greater Jakarta area. In the course of this research, many of the characteristics of what observers have termed Islamization are clearly in view. When compared to the public face of Islam in the 1970s, when I began research in the region, for example, there are clear signs of an increased prevalence of the markers of Islamic identity; Islam features much more in the media; it has thoroughly penetrated campus politics as well as the political arena more generally; etc. However, the overall impression that there exists a more or less homogeneous set of agents pushing a more or less cohesive agenda does not ring entirely true. Indeed in a number of

respects, observations such as these seem more pertinent to the situation in contemporary Malaysia. However, this is a personal impression based on what has so far been a relatively short amount of time doing research in Jakarta and, perhaps, the atypicality of the people we have so far met and interviewed. Before the contention that Islamization, in the sense given to that term by Ricklefs and other western observers, has reached unprecedented levels, that it is irreversible, and that it has effectively overwhelmed alternative forms of Muslim religiosity can be properly assessed, one would need first to answer questions such as the following:

- a. To what extent are accounts of the onward march of Islamization in Indonesia and elsewhere in Muslim Southeast Asia historically accurate? Is the process still going on or has it abated or even been reversed in the last couple of years (for example, in Indonesia due to the failure of what has become the major political force pushing an Islamizing agenda, the Partai Keadilan Sejahtera [Prosperous Justice Party – PKS] to build on its promising showing in the 2009 elections, partly due to the charges of corruption currently being brought against the party leadership)? How accurate is the claim that the spaces for alternative voices and interpretations are being increasingly shut down? Do alternative spaces still exist? Did such spaces exist in the years between 1998 and the period when the Ricklefs book was being written? Or, if not, have such spaces emerged in the years since then?
- b. What about the interpretations and explanations of the motivations and activities of agents involved offered by the critics of Islamization? Are they accurate? (Again, take for example the contention that the PKS, despite the claim by its leadership that it stands for democracy, clean government and a gradualist approach to Islamization, is in fact all about curtailing democracy and imposing sharia law and an Islamic state by force if necessary, a conclusion he bases on the attitudes at the party's grassroots).
- c. Finally, if Islamization has indeed reached “unprecedented” levels, how is it that such an admittedly relatively small number of agents actively pushing the Islamizing agenda have been able

to produce such a significant impact on state and society in Indonesia more widely?

One could, of course, point to forces in contemporary Indonesia that serve to temper, if not at times even to actively counter, the anti-pluralist, anti-democratic agendas of those 'Islamizers' that have so concerned the critics. There are, for example, various parties and organizations representing Indonesia's non-Muslim (especially Christian and Hindu) and non-Pribumi (e.g. ethnically Chinese) communities, for whom the threat posed by proponents of Islamization in the critical sense is often very real. However, given that the overwhelming majority of Indonesians are Muslims, it is difficult to see how such groups on their own can effectively counter the agendas of Islamizers.

There are also opponents of the Islamization, in the sense that the term is used by most Western observers, among Muslims. Many, for example, have pointed to the more 'tolerant' stance adopted by at least parts of the 'traditionalist' Nahdlatul Ulama movement, a mass organization that had its greatest influence at the time of the Presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid between 1999-2001. Despite a decline in NU influence in recent years, due in part to the splits that followed on from Wahid's death, NU continues to attract large numbers of followers and to claim the allegiance of many religious leaders and teachers. There are also organisations like Jaringan Islam Liberal (Liberal Islam Network- JIL), founded in 2001 explicitly to counter what was perceived to be the rising tide of Islamic radicalism in the country. However, although still prominent, JIL appears to have difficulty gaining any kind of traction among the majority of Indonesian Muslims, including those who share its concerns about the sorts of Islamising agendas described above.³

Finally, it is important to stress that the relationship between Islam on the one hand and the, supposedly, secular state (and political process more generally) in Indonesia has meant that outside the relatively small Islamic parties like PKS, there has been little official support for the actions of Islamizers, a situation that differs radically from the one in neighbouring Malaysia, where there has been considerable state support for, even state sponsorship of, the

demands of the Islamizers. No doubt, as Ricklefs and others point out, Indonesia's political elites have not always acted to counter these demands, either out of sympathy for at least some of them or, more often, the fear that in opposing them they will be judged un-Islamic by the electorate. But there are certainly now influential segments of the political elite who are showing themselves to be far more active in their defence of democratic principles in the face of the demands of the Islamizers.⁴ More generally, as is often observed, explicitly Islamic religious parties in Indonesia very rarely achieve sufficiently high levels of support from the electorate to claim government, and the largest parties are most at least ostensibly committed to political secularism.

However, as the argument goes, all these opponents of the Islamization process are either embattled or in decline, and have been at least since the late 1990s. It is certainly true that the municipality of Depok, where our research activities have been focused, has become something of a PKS stronghold in recent years. At the time of writing, the mayor was a PKS member, and PKS had more elected members on the municipal council than any other party.

However, before one rushes to lay the blame for this state of affairs solely on 'dahwahists' and 'revivalists', it is worth asking whether, if indeed more 'liberal' and 'secular' voices are being increasingly drowned out, this might also be due to the fact that self-styled liberals and secularists are finding it increasingly difficult to speak directly to the hopes and aspirations of a large (and apparently growing) number of Muslims who are searching for ways of doing and being that are somehow 'more Islamic' than in the past and to acknowledge their genuinely-felt concerns about the threat to Islam that is posed by the combined forces of globalisation, westernisation and secularisation. From this perspective, by refusing to engage directly with the core of Islamic belief (its ontological claims) and with their religious experiences, the opponents of Islamization mentioned above appear to be determined to place restrictions on, if not explicitly to devalue, the very 'Muslim-ness' of the mass of Indonesian Muslims.

In the research, we have been concerned therefore to establish whether there are alternatives to the forces driving 'Islamization' –

and hence whether there are alternatives to this supposedly dominant way of being Muslim in contemporary Indonesia— that are, one might say, more explicitly Islamic and as such also more likely to gain traction among influential opinion makers among the Indonesia’s Muslim middle classes and, through them, the broader mass of Indonesian Muslims. And if such alternative forms of Muslim religiosity do exist, might they serve to mediate between the agendas of the so-called Islamizers on the one hand and their self-declared liberal, modernist, and secular opponents on the other such that a future quite different from that envisaged by observers like Ricklefs might unfold? In other words, in addition to asking about the accuracy of recent accounts of the trajectory of Islamization in places like Indonesia (and Malaysia), there are two further issues that seem particularly salient to any attempt to assess the implications of the changes that have taken place in recent decades:

- 1) Is Islamization in fact a useful concept at all? Does it describe a singular, homogeneous or even a coherent process? Or does the use of the term conflate rather different ways in which Southeast Asian Muslims are seeking to be ‘more Islamic’ than they were several decades ago?

And secondly

- 2) Is the largely negative stance of most western, liberal and/or modernist observers vis-à-vis the process of Islamization in places like Indonesia justified? Specifically, is being ‘more Islamic’ necessarily incompatible with ‘freedom’ as Ricklefs would have it? Is it necessarily also to be anti-democratic and hostile to human rights, religious diversity and women’s rights, even ‘totalitarian’, as many of the critics of Islamization have suggested?

These are the sorts of questions that the current research aims to answer and I now turn to a preliminary report on the work on new forms of Islamic spirituality in which I am currently engaged.

The Spirit of Depok

As researchers, we have been seeking out organizations, groups and individuals whose beliefs, practices and agendas may be seen as involving an attempt to be somehow “more Islamic”, but which at the same time do not fall neatly into the category of ‘Islamizers’ as that term is normally understood. In so doing we have found that a rather different kind of Islamization is quite extensive in Depok, the main research site, where, as noted above, support for one of the main Islamizing forces, namely the Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, runs high. We have found instead that for relatively large numbers of Muslims in and around Depok, being more Islamic is not about, or more accurately not *primarily* or *only* about, the drive to impose Islamic law or to more clearly signal ones Islamic identity. For most of our respondents, it is instead also, or even mainly, about the search for a closer relationship to and/or experience of, the Divine.

The Setting

As noted, the research has focussed in the first instance on the Municipality of Depok, a satellite city of some 2 million people on the southern fringes of Central Jakarta (Jakarta Pusat). Situated in the Province of West Java, Depok is one of five municipalities that make up the Greater Jakarta metropolitan region (Jabodetabek).

Historical documents show that Depok was originally a Christian settlement. In the early 17th century, Cornelis Chastelein, an official of the Dutch East India Company, bought a large amount of land in what is now Depok, and brought in 150 slaves from elsewhere in the archipelago to work it. Chastelein is said to have been a devout Protestant and the name of the religious organisation that he established to teach his slaves to speak Dutch and convert them to Christianity (De Eerste Protestante Organisatie van Christenen or “Depoc”), is said to have lent its name to the settlement. According to the provisions of Chastelein’s will, on his death the slaves were set free and they inherited the land. 5

Although there are still Protestant residents who trace their ancestry back to the founders of the twelve clans formed by Chastelein’s former slaves, the religious makeup of modern Depok stems from the period of rapid population growth that took place in

the latter decades of the 20th century. As late as the mid-1970s, Depok (then a subdistrict of Bogor Municipality) had only about 100,000 residents and it was best known as a place where fruit and nuts were grown for the Jakarta market. Beginning in the mid-1970s, stimulated by rapid urban expansion during the Suharto regime, the population began to increase rapidly such that by the time the subdistrict was excised from Bogor Municipality in the late 1990s, it had reached one million. This increase was driven by the growth of Jakarta as a whole and real estate speculators and property developers cashing in on an increased demand for land for housing and residential property on the urban fringe; by businesses catering to rising consumer demand; and, from the mid-1970s, by the implementation of policies favourable to peri-urban development. Also, the main campus of the University of Indonesia was relocated to Depok in the late 1970s by the Suharto regime in an attempt to keep student radicalism outside the city centre.

From a small town (by Indonesian standards) of some 100,000 inhabitants in the 1970s, by the late 1990s Depok had become a major satellite city of more than 1.3 million, rising to just under 2 million in 2012. And a workforce consisting mostly of agriculturalists, shop keepers, small-scale manufacturers and petty traders, had by 2012 grown to 728,675 (with 86,387 unemployed), 62.67% of whom now worked as wage labourers, government servants (*pegawai*) and employees of larger companies (*karyawan*). The proportion of the workforce describing themselves as self-employed fell to just 20%, and the development of new housing estates and shopping malls has continued apace, leading one observer to describe modern Depok as a “concrete rainforest”.⁶

These changes are reflected in the changing religious landscape of Depok. Like the rest of the metropolitan area, Depok now has a Muslim majority. In 2012, of the some 2 million Depok residents, 1,245,169 were Muslim, 59,926 Protestant, 65,765 Catholic, 9,663 Hindu and 11,057 Buddhist and there were 670 mosques compared to only 104 Protestant churches, the latter mainly serving the Chinese Christian community.⁷

The Respondents

As noted, basing ourselves in Depok in the first instance we have sought out and engaged in conversation with a range of Muslims whose beliefs, practices and agendas we felt involved attempts to be somehow ‘more Islamic’, but which at the same time did not place them neatly in the category of Islamizers. In so doing we have been making contacts and speaking with group leaders, religious scholars, teachers, musicians, academics and other relatively prominent individuals and following up by attending events (*pengajian*, revival meetings, musical performances) which they organised. Whenever possible we have also participated in practices (prayer and remembrance services), and talked with other participants. Most of these activities have been located or based in Depok itself, although we have also spoken with people and attended events elsewhere in Jabodetabek.

It is not possible to provide a complete list of all the individuals with whom we have met or the groups and organisations to which they belonged. Moreover, the ethical guidelines set out by our home institution, The University of Melbourne, forbid us from identifying the individuals who have agreed to participate in the research, even though no one as yet has expressed any concern for their privacy. The following is a list of some of the people and groups with whom we have engaged so far:

- a. Academics and students at the University of Indonesia, Depok Campus (and at the State Islamic University and Paramadina University, both in southern Jakarta) who have conducted their own research on Sufism and Sufi groups both in Greater Jakarta and elsewhere on Java;
- b. The head of an Nahdlatul Ulama-affiliated religious school (*pasantren*) in Depok;
- c. The prominent leader and religious teacher (*ustaz*) of a large and highly visible *dakwah* organisation (*yayasan*) who has made, and continues to make, frequent television appearances and whose ‘revival’ meetings both in his former home mosque in Depok and elsewhere throughout the archipelago attract thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, of participants. He also has a strong internet presence;

- d. The head teacher of a Muslim primary school in Depok who is a follower *and* employee of the *ustaz*;
- e. A prominent Muslim intellectual, artist, poet and novelist who originates from eastern Java, but who now lives in Depok. He is *associated* with one of the large *tarekat* (Sufi Orders) represented in Indonesia but does not call himself Ustaz because, acting on principle, he refuses to declare the customary oath of allegiance (*bay'at*) to the Syeikh. He conducts *penganjian* and *zikr* at his home mosque in Depok, which we attended, on a weekly basis at a mosque in Central Jakarta, and, by invitation, in many other parts of Indonesia. He is also contracted on a regular basis to deliver 'spiritual training' courses to the employees of a number of government departments;
- f. A practitioner of Islamic alternative medicine (*pengobatan alternatif*) who is head of a seemingly rather lucrative practice operating out of a *foundation* based in Central Jakarta (where I took part in a three day, one-on-one Islamic '*terapi*' session);
- g. Several members of a well-known Sufi music group *cum* rock band who are also members of a Sufi 'intentional community' around the figure of an American-born *syekh* and poet (who also writes the lyrics for most of their songs). The community moved from the United States to Indonesia in the early 2000s, all the members are now Indonesian citizens, they speak excellent Indonesian, and perform on a mixture of Western (electric guitars, drums) and Middle Eastern (flute, zither, drums) instruments. Although their community is currently located in South Jakarta, we met them at an informal performance for 'family and friends' at the urban commune in Depok mentioned below;
- h. The members of a popular singing group, some of whom live in Depok, who pioneered the modern *Nasyid* boy band, a *capella* style of Islamic pop music and who won a number of prestigious music awards in their early years. We met and talked at some length with the band members and attended a performance at a school in another part of Jakarta;
- i. We attended a very large 'revival' meeting, which attracted a large audience of some 20,000 people to Monas Park in Central Jakarta. The star attraction was one of Indonesia's famous *Habib*

- (Syeikh of Hadhrami descent). Apart from an address by the Habib, the event featured a marriage ceremony involving one of the Habib's children, an appearance by a prominent Muslim politician, stirring music and a light show that would have done a stadium rock band proud;
- j. The autodidact 'Sufi' founder and leader of a very successful (it has a per capita GNP 'higher than Malaysia's'), environmentally-oriented 'intentional community' based in Depok, whose members raise cattle, goats and fish and, offsite, organic rice and other agricultural products for sale, as well as organising weekly musical performances (rock, jazz, blues and the Sufi band mentioned above);
 - k. A well-known South Jakarta-based self-identified Sufi journalist and short story writer whose works have also appeared in English translation and who now, aged in his mid-70s, earns his living selling paintings of Angels (*Malaikat*);
 - l. The South Jakarta headquarters of a 'spiritual movement' that began in Indonesia in the 1920s and that from the 1950s spread rapidly to Europe and North America;
 - m. A Sufi 'Café' in the city centre which organises lectures, discussion groups and Sufi performances (featuring 'whirling dervishes') in different parts of the metropolitan region. The Café is affiliated with a global Sufi *tarekat* with headquarters in North America.

What do these individuals and groups have in common? Influenced in part by the writings of scholars like Martin van Bruinessen and Julia Howell,⁸ we began by searching out self-identified Sufi groups in and around Depok. However, the term Sufism –to say nothing of terms like 'urban Sufism', 'neo-Sufism' and the like which are in frequent use in Indonesia today is imprecise, ambiguous and contested, as Carl Ernst has pointed out:

In the academy today there is a fair degree of ambiguity attached to the concept of Sufism. As with other terms coined during the enlightenment to describe religions, Sufism has now become a standard term, whether we like it or not. I would suggest that 'Sufism' can best be used as a descriptive term of the "family resemblance" variety, to cover all the external social and historical manifestations associated with Sufi orders, saints, and the interior practice of Islam. Since this lacks the normative and prescriptive force of the ethical term 'Sufi,' it is important to point out ... the gap between outsider and insider

perspectives and to point out the objectives that govern any presentation of the subject.⁹

Certainly there was little agreement among academics and students of Sufism with whom we spoke. And neither did the Muslim teachers, adepts and practitioners we talked with share a clear understanding of the term, nor did they always agree on who was and who was not a 'real' Sufi or a 'real' *ustaz*, etc. While certain individuals and groups could be more or less unambiguously placed in that category - notably those who are formally associated with one of the large *tarekat* (Sufi Orders) represented in Indonesia (Naqsyabandiyah, Qadiriyyah, Syattariyyah, etc.), typically by having sworn an oath of allegiance (*Bayat*) to a Sufi Syech or Ustaz - others are much more difficult to classify. Ultimately, the dividing line between Sufi and non-Sufi became so blurred as to make the distinction almost impossible to maintain.

Instead, the term "modern gnostic" seems a more apt label for the kinds of religiosity which we have encountered. To label these groups and individuals "gnostic" is not to suggest a direct literal correspondence with the so-called 'Gnosticism' of the Jewish-Hellenic-Roman world of Antiquity. To use such terms as Gnosis, Gnostic and Gnosticism is not to assume that they can be dealt with easily, straightforwardly and unproblematically, either in relation to their historical sources and backgrounds, or to their modern articulations. The term is significant for two main reasons here: firstly, because it points to a stream of special inner knowledge and enlightenment understood as flowing out of direct experiential encounters with the very (un)ground of being; secondly, because it allows us to see the extent to which the Gnostic turn is really a recent iteration of a cultural, intellectual, and theological project which has deeper roots in modern thought and culture. In this regard, Benjamin Lazier, for example, uses the term to characterise developments in 20th twentieth-century theology associated with the ideas of Barth and Rosenschweig, which were subsequently taken up by philosophers, political theorists and others in Germany and France between the wars, the most significant of whom was Hans Jonas with his monumental work on the Gnostic tradition.¹⁰ And although he does not use the term, Riley identifies parallels with that 'intellectual pursuit of the sacred' that characterised the work

of a number of prominent post-Durkheim sociologists and anthropologists in France, a pursuit that, he argues, was taken up again by the exponents of so-called post-structuralism.¹¹

Gnostic stirrings or onto-gnostic turns, in the modern life-world and culture, do not acquire their meaning on the basis of being the literal incarnation of some discrete ancient tradition but because they are part of a rich, fluid and continually re-worked framing of powerful wisdom. What is being described here is an adventure that starts with the intention-impulse to seek out an opening into 'unseen' and 'impossible' worlds, to encounter, experience and understand sacred or non-ordinary realities from within, or even at one with them.¹²

As noted, while appropriately labelled Sufi or not, for many of the groups or individuals mentioned above, being a Muslim is not about, or more accurately not primarily or only about, the drive to impose Islamic law or to more clearly signal ones Islamic identity. It is about pursuing some sort of mystical union with God. So-called 'mystical' religious experience is, of course, nothing new in Indonesia. However, historically it tended to be restricted to religious specialists (*dukun*, holy men and those dedicated to an ascetic life) and mediated by 'traditional' (e.g. 'javanist', *kebatinan*, *kejawen*, or 'animist') idioms. What makes the current form of spirituality distinctive is that the pursuit of the spiritual or 'interior' dimension of religious life manifests a desire on the part of many Muslims: 1) to experience the sacred in or through a more explicitly Islamic medium or idiom; and 2) to do so directly, personally and for oneself. Apart from being committed to a self-consciously orthodox Muslim religiosity, the groups and individuals listed above share in a desire for a personal experience of God which they pursue by themselves taking part in emotionally charged collective prayer (*doa*) and repentance (*tobat*); the practice of 'remembrance' of the name of God involving rhythmic and repetitive chanting (*zikr*); or through touching or being touched by holy men or healers. Others pursue sacred experience in less orthodox –but in my own experience often more effective– ways: musical groups, poets and painters, along with their audiences, through music, poetry and art; others 'lose themselves' in physical activity, like the followers of

the *ustaz* mentioned who participate in the fortnightly futsal game that the prayer and remembrance service he leads at a nearby mosque (during which, as the *ustaz* frequently reminds them, they are still in direct contact with God). And some, notably the leader of the intentional community mentioned above, insist that all that meditation, chanting and dancing in which more orthodox Sufis indulge is a waste their time, and that the sacred can only be experienced by labouring in and on behalf of the spiritual community. “Who knows whether we go to Heaven after we die?” a member of his community told me. “We can make sure, through our own efforts that we will be in heaven when we are still alive.” To be sure, the activities and performances we took part in mostly began with sermons (*pengajian*) or some other form of rationalist explication and exegesis. But their real *raison d’être*, the reason why most people participate, is for the emotionally charged, spirit-enhancing parts of the events.

Conclusions

What should we make of these findings? What is the significance of these “gnostic” forms of religiosity and what do they say about the nature of religious transformation in Indonesia (and elsewhere in Muslim Southeast Asia)? Are they to be understood as part of the general process of Islamization discussed in the recent literature on Islam in Southeast Asia? Or do they constitute something of an alternative to it.

Before going further two caveats on the research findings are necessary. Firstly, our methods have been largely anthropological/ethnographic, meaning that it is not possible to say anything definitive about the representativeness of our ‘sample’. I make no apology for this. Despite the obstacles to pursuing ‘real’ ethnographic research in often quite large urban areas, by refusing to force people to respond to pre-set questions and attempting to interview a random sample of respondents but instead selecting respondents somewhat randomly, according mainly to our ability to obtain personal introduction to them and to their willingness subsequently to take part in the research, allowing them to speak as much as possible without strong direction, and seeking to participate, in an

admittedly limited way, in their religious activities and practices, we been able to achieve a perspective that those employing more formal methods of sampling and interviewing have signally failed to do. However, further research, and of a rather different kind, is needed we can establish the statistical significance of our findings.

Secondly, what I am here calling the Gnostic dimension of Islamic belief and practice in contemporary Southeast Asia is just that. It is a *dimension*, and not a separate and identifiable *form* of Islam. It would be misleading to divide Gnostic, spiritually-oriented, inner-directed, esoteric and/or Sufistically-inclined Muslims on the one hand from outwardly-directed, exoteric or Sharia-oriented Islamizers on the other, as some observers have been inclined to do. At least among the individuals and groups that we have encountered, there is considerable variability in their attitudes towards and support for those outwardly-inclined, exoteric, Sharia-oriented goals that are typically imputed to Islamizers. Some were more sympathetic than others to the latter and some were even members of parties like PKS and other organisations generally thought to be behind the process of Islamization. And none rejected what one might call the external, this-worldly and ritualistic dimensions of Islam.

That being said almost all of our respondents were more concerned with the inner, experiential, sacred dimensions of Muslim belief and practice, and therefore in one way or another with forging a closer relationship with the Divine, than with imposing their views on others. The very fact that we found it so easy to find evidence of this alternative religiosity suggests at the very least that the undimensional –and be it said rather alarmist– accounts of Islamization and its negative implications for democracy, human rights and inter- (and intra-religious) dialogue need to be taken with a grain of salt. And it does at least raise the possibility of an alternative to both religious and secular ‘fundamentalism’ in contemporary Indonesia.

Our findings also suggest that there are significant parallels between the emergence of new forms of Muslim religiosity in Indonesia and religious developments elsewhere. So-called Charismatic Christianity, for example, similarly involves the pursuit of a

closer, personalised relationship to God in what might be called an explicitly religious idiom. Tanya Luhrman's description of the 'charismatic' evangelicals in North America whom she studied is a case in point:

It is indeed a striking God, this modern God imagined by so many American evangelicals. Each generation meets God in its own manner. Over the last few decades, this generation of Americans has sought out an intensely personal God, a God who not only cares about your welfare but worries with you about whether to pain the kitchen table. These Americans call themselves evangelical to assert that they are part of the conservative Christian tradition that understands the Bible to be literally or near literally true ... But the feature that most deeply characterizes them is that the God they seek is more personally intimate, and more intimately experienced, than the God most Americans grew up with. These evangelicals have sought out and cultivated concrete experience of God's realness ... While these longings for God's realness are not novel in our religious history, what is new is that the experience and practices we associate with medieval monks or impoverished snake-handlers have now become white, middle-class and mainstream.¹³

There are also parallels with the growth of the "spiritual-not-religious" demographic identified in recent surveys of religious affiliation in the West. These surveys show that, despite a decline in affiliation with formal religious institutions, the number of people labelling themselves 'atheist' or 'agnostic' has not significantly increased, while large numbers of respondents continue to describe themselves as spiritually-inclined. And, while there are significant differences in the institutional forms of Islam and Christianity in particular (notably the absence of a 'church' structure in Islam), I would argue that there are similarities between the new Muslim spiritualities described here and the de-institutionalised religiosities of the contemporary (post-Christian) West.¹⁴

To advocate for the Gnostic –whether in Asia or the West– is clearly to enter into very murky waters. Setting aside the irony in a Marxist and self-confessed child of the enlightenment seeking to dictate what are, and what are not, "proper" forms of religiosity, Jürgen Habermas has described it as part of "new, deinstitutionalized forms of a fickle religiosity that [have] withdrawn entirely into the subjective".¹⁵ And Slavoj Žižek, writes that all 'easternised' religiosities, whether in the West or in Asia, perfectly fit:

... the fetishist mode of ideology in our allegedly "post-ideological" era, as opposed to its traditional symptomal mode, in which the ideological lie which

structures our perception of reality is threatened by symptoms qua "returns of the repressed," cracks in the fabric of the ideological lie. Fetish is effectively a kind of envers (*sic*) of the symptom.¹⁶

Natural and social scientists, religious studies scholars and many others have been quick to denounce the Gnostic turn as irrational, contrary to the laws of science, inauthentic, orientalist, colonial and overly subjectivist, while (post)modern Sufis, along with Buddhists, Hindus, Taoists, have been judged guilty of cultural appropriation and political quietism (if not 'fascism'). Their religious practices have been denounced as typical of those leading an individualistic and commoditized, middle class lifestyle and their beliefs ridiculed for their naïve universalism. And this is not to mention the widespread tendency in the media always to mention cultism, fraud and sexual misconduct whenever the doings of Sufi, Buddhist, or Hindu teachers and adepts come in for public scrutiny. There is evidence of all of these shortcomings among the new Muslim Gnostics of Depok. The challenge, for both analyst and practitioner is to find ways of overcoming them.¹⁷

Endnotes

- ¹ The research in Indonesia is at an early stage and my remarks need therefore to be treated as preliminary. I would like to acknowledge The Australian Research Council for funding the overall comparative project on New Spiritualities in Southeast Asia (University of Melbourne, Ethics ID: 1339258), which involves research in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. I am also grateful for the support, advice and friendship of Professor Yekti Maunati of LIPI, my sponsor in Indonesia; Dr Siti Rohmah Soekarba, Professor Melani Budianta and Dr Tommy Christomy of the Fakultas Ilmu Pengetahuan Budaya, Universitas Indonesia who have helped me in innumerable ways; my fellow researchers, Dr Bryan Rochelle and Mr Thigor Anugrah Harahap; and all those who generously gave of their time to helping us to understand what being a Muslim was all about.
- ² *Islamisation and its Opponents in Java: c 1930s to the Present*, Singapore University Press, 2012
- ³ For some recent research on the attacks on JIL, particularly by Islamic radicals, see Imam Ardhianto, "Politik Penciptaan Publik dan Media Sosial: Narasi Ummat, Kebangsaan, dan Kebudayaan Populer pada Gerakan JIL" Working Progress Paper, Center of Anthropological Studies, University of Indonesia, 2013.
- ⁴ As for example in 2013 when the Governor of Jakarta and his outspoken Deputy acted decisively to reject the demands (supported, as is often the case in such situations, by the FPI) to replace the democratically elected

(Christian) mayor of Lenteng Agung with a Muslim on the grounds of that the majority of the population is Muslim. If Jokowi does indeed become President, one wonders whether the passivity in the face of Islamizing demands attributed to the regime will change.

- ⁵ Jakarta Globe, <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/archive/who-are-the-real-belanda-depok/>, accessed 8/4/14
- ⁶ “Depok City History”, <http://www.bubblews.com/news/2015020-depok-city-history>, accessed 8/4/14
- ⁷ Figures from *Kota Depok dalam Angka 2012*. Bapeda Kota Depok and Badan Pusat Statistik: Kota Depok, 2012.
- ⁸ See for example Julia Day Howell, ‘Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 60(3): 701-729, 2001; Martin van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell, eds. *Sufism and the ‘Modern’ in Islam*, London, New York: I.B.Taurus, 2007; Martin van Bruinessen, “What happened to the smiling face of Indonesian Islam?” S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Working Paper No. 222, 2011.
- ⁹ Carl Ernst, “Between Orientalism and Fundamentalism: Problematizing the Teaching of Sufism”, in Brannon M Wheeler (ed) (2003) *Teaching Islam*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2003), p. 110.
- ¹⁰ Benjamin Lazier, *God Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination between the World War*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008.
- ¹¹ Riley, Alexander (2010) *Godless intellectuals? The intellectual pursuit of the sacred reinvented*, New York: Berghahn Books.
- ¹² Thanks to Francesco Formosa for help with this discussion. An invaluable reference on Gnosticism is Wouter J. Hanegraaff in collaboration with Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek and Jean-Pierre Brach, *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2006.
- ¹³ Tanya Luhrman, ‘Preface’, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. New York: Alfred A. Knopff, 2012 (extract from ebook version, p. 3/10, accessed 1 April, 2014).
- ¹⁴ For discussion and analysis of these new forms of Western spirituality, see ‘Spirituality, Political Engagement and Public Life’, <http://www.ssrc.org/programs/spirituality-political-engagement-and-public-life/>, accessed 25 August 2011. For some of the , mainly North America-based, research on the phenomenon see P. Heelas, P. and L. Woodhead (2005) *The Spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality*. Malden: Blackwell; Robert C. Fuller (2001) *Spiritual, but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America*. Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press; Ruth Frankenberg (2004) *Living Spirit, Living Practice: Poetics, Politics, Epistemology*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press; Courtney Bender (2010) *The New Metaphysicals*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.; and Laura R. Olson (2010) ‘Who are the “spiritual but not religious”’, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/08/04/who-are-the-spiritual/>, accessed 25 August 2011.

- ¹⁵ Cited in Eduardo Mendieta (2010) ‘A postsecular world society? an interview with Jürgen Habermas’. <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/02/03/a-postsecular-world-society/>. Accessed 15 March 2010.
- ¹⁶ Slavoj Žižek, (2001) “Self-Deceptions: On Being Tolerant and Smug”. *Die Gazette (Israel)* 27 August 2001. <http://www.lacan.com/zizek-self.htm> (accessed 29/5/11).
- ¹⁷ These debates are tackled in much greater detail in Joel S. Kahn, *Asia Modernity and the Pursuit of the Sacred: towards a gnostic anthropology* (forthcoming).

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Heritage of Nusantara is a specific journal for the studies of Nusantara heritage. Nusantara meant in this journal is the areas covering Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Southern Part of Thailand, Southern Part of the Philipines and also Timor Leste.

Heritage of Nusantara is a peer reviewed journal using bilingual (English and Arabic). The aims of the journal is to introduce the richness of the cultural legacies or heritage of Nusantara in particular and to show its relations as well as contributions to the world heritage in general by publishing the research papers, articles and literary criticism or book reviews concerned. It is hopefully intended to give a better and wider outlook and understanding to the readers concerning the heritage of Nusantara, and above all offers a wide variety of analysis on how to preserve and develop the heritage of Nusantara.

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All statements, opinions, conclusions etc. taken from another writer's work should be cited, whether the work is directly quoted, paraphrased or summarised. In the Harvard System, cited publications are referred to in the text by giving the author's surname and the year of publication in one of the forms shown below. If details of particular parts of a document are required, e.g. page numbers, they should be given after the year within the parentheses.

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Title.

Edition. (if not the first).

Place of publication:

Publisher.

e.g. Mercer, P.A. and Smith, G., 1993. Private viewdata in the UK. 2nd ed. London: Longman.

Reference to a contribution in a book

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Contributing author's Surname, Initials.,
Year of publication.

Title of contribution. Followed by *In*.

Initials. Surname, of author or editor of publication by ed. or eds if relevant

Title of book.

Place of publication:

Publisher,

Page number(s) of contribution.

e.g. Bantz, C.R., 1995. Social dimensions of software development.
In. J.A. Anderson, ed. Annual review of software management and development. Newbury Park, C: Sage, 502-510.

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Year of publication.

Title of journal

Volume number and (part number),

Page numbers of contribution.

e.g. Evans, W.A., 1994, Approaches to intelligent information retrieval. Information processing and management, 7 (2), 147-168.

Reference to a conference paper

Elements to cite:

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Year of publication.

Title of contribution. Followed by *In*:

Initials. Surname, of editor of conference proceedings (if applicable) followed by ed. or eds.

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Place of publication:

Publisher.

Page numbers of contribution.

e.g. Silver, K., 1991. Electronic mail: the new way to communicate.
In: D.I. Raitt, ed 9th international online information meeting,
London 3-5 December 1990. Oxford: Learned Information, 323-330.

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Title of publication.

Place of publication:

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Report Number (where relevant).

e.g. Unesco, 1993. *General information programme and UNISIST*.
Paris: Unesco, (PGI-93/WS/22).

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Elements to cite:

Author's Surname, Initials.,

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e.g. Agutter, A.J., 1995. The linguistic significance of current
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Author. (Year). Title. *Journal Title* [online], volume (issue), location within host. Available from : URL [Accessed Date].

e.g. Korb, K.B. (1995). Persons and things: book review of Bringsjord on Robot-Consciousness. *Psychology* [online], 6 (15). Available from: <gopher://wachau.ai.univie.ac.at:70/00/-archives/psychology/95.V6/0162> [Accessed 17 Jun 1996].

3. Reference to mailbase/listserv e-mail lists

Author. (Day Month Year). Subject of message. *Discussion List* [online] Available from: list e-mail address [Accessed Date].

e.g. Brack, E.V. (2 May 1995). Re: Computing short courses. *Lis-link* [online]. Available from: mailbase@mailbase.ac.uk [Accessed 17 Apr 1996].

Jensen, L.R. (12 Dec 1995). Recommendation of student radio/tv in English. *LASTAR* [online]. Available from: Listserv@ftp.nrg.dtu.dk [Accessed 29 Apr 1996].

It should be noted that items may only be kept on discussion group servers for a short time and hence may not be suitable for referencing. A local copy could be kept by the author who is giving the citation, with a note to this effect.

4. Reference to personal electronic communications (E-mail)

Sender (Sender's E-mail address). (Day Month Year). *Subject of Message*. E-mail to Recipient (Recipient's E-mail address).
Lowman, D. (deborah-lowman@pbsinc.com). (4 Apr 1996). RE>>*ProCite and Internet Refere*. E-mail to P. Cross (pcross@bournemouth.ac.uk)

5. Reference to CD-ROMs

This section refers to CD-ROMS which are works in their own right and non bibliographic databases.

Author/editor. (Year). *Title* [type of medium CD-ROM]. (Edition). Place of publication, publisher (if ascertainable). Available from: Supplier/Database identifier or number (optional) [Accessed Date] (optional).

e.g. Hawking, S.W. (1994). *A Brief history of time: an interactive adventure* [CD-ROM]. Crunch Media (See Harvard Referencing style)

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 - e. Discussion (including the analysis from the author on the problem)
 - f. Conclusion
 - g. Acknowledgement if any
 - h. List of References

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السنة الثالثة، العدد 2، 2014

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مدير التحرير:

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مساعد هيئة التحرير:

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كوسانتو

عارف شيرا ملسي

الصورة (The Terengganu Inscription) في الغلاف الأمامي مأخوذة من الصورة في المقالة *Dialectic Between Islamic Law and Adat Law in the Nusantara: A Reinterpretation of the Terengganu Inscription in the 14th Century*

محور هذه المجلة هو تزويد القراء بمعلومات حول خطة إندونيسية ودولية في تطوير المؤلفات والتراث الديني من خلال نشر المقالات والتقارير البحثية ومراجعات الكتب.

تركزت هريتيج اوف نوسانتارا للبحث في المؤلفات الدينية سواء كانت معاصرة أو قديمة، والتراث الديني الواقع في جنوب شرق آسيا، وترحب بمساهمات المثقفين والعلماء المتخصصين في هذا المجال.

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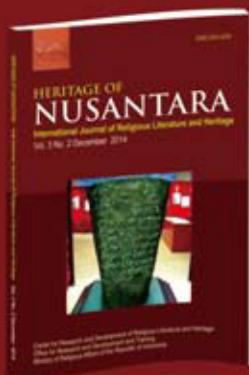
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نوسانتارا

مجلة دولية لبحث المؤلفات والتراث الديني
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