Promoting Pluralism in Islamic Schools Through Arts Education

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I joined Muhammadiyah University to teach Social Psychology in 1997, after I completed my Masters degree in the US. I therefore already had some cross-cultural experience before I joined Muhammadiyah and moved in to Solo, the city that hosts the university. I soon felt a bit isolated living in a city that only had minimal interactions of communities across different ethnicities and religions. I observed that religious prejudices and intolerance simmer quietly in the city that is often regarded as a 'hotspot' for religious radicalism. These same problems occur in my university, which is affiliated to Muhammadiyah, the second largest Islamic organization in Indonesia.

Muhammadiyah claims to have 25-30 million supporters. It is a reformist and modern Islamic organization established nearly a century ago by Kyai Haji Ahmad Dahlan, a visionary and progressive Muslim activist and thinker. He brought forward the *tajdid*, or the renewal of Islamic thought, as Muhammadiyah's mission. He sought to enable Muhammadiyah to make a significant contribution to the improvement of social welfare.

Two of Muhammadiyah's most significant works are its health services and its community-oriented education. There are numerous Muhammadiyah hospitals, as well as Muhammadiyah schools. For example, Muhammadiyah has approximately 165 tertiary educational institutions, spread out throughout the

archipelago. If we count all the schools, from the kindergartens to high schools, the number would be around 12,000. As such, through education, Muhammadiyah has an enormous opportunity to foster social change. I work in this field of education, trying to promote change through alternative policies and methods.

I would now like to give a brief introduction about Islam in Indonesia and its reactions to arts and pluralism. Most Indonesian Muslims are moderate and tolerant, but the discourse of Indonesian Islam is dominated by a scriptural-conservative minority. This latter group promotes a return to "pure Islam", namely, the orthodox version dominant in Saudi Arabia, which insists on Qur'anic uniformity and absolutism based on a single interpretation of Islam.

Their puritanical worldviews are reflected in religious teachings, especially in mosques and schools. Freedom of thought and expression in mosques and Islamic schools are strictly censored by religious authorities in order to keep the faith "pure" and "sacred". Religious education, which is compulsory in both public and Islamic schools or *madrasahs*, spreads this conservative Islam to younger generations. The main religious education offered is often the rote memorization of the Qur'an, and many times accompanied by messages of intolerance towards non-believers (referring to non-Muslims). By making exclusive truth-claims and inculcating dogmas, I believe that religious teaching in these schools has contributed to the escalation of schisms and tensions among ethnic and cultural groups.

Furthermore, since prevailing Muslim attitudes identify Islam with Arabia, many Indonesian Muslims have little appreciation and respect for the diversity of local cultures, customs, and artistic traditions. Traditional arts and local customs are disparaged as "un-Islamic" because they are "polluted" by pre-Islamic influences from Hinduism, Buddhism and pagan faiths. Conservative Muslims also oppose the arts – any arts, whether traditional or modern – because they find in them elements incompatible with Muslim doctrines. For instance, they regard attractive costumes, body movements, and women's voices as seductive, and therefore, sinful. They seem to see nudity in everything, even when arts have no overt sexual content. Another argument against the arts,

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according to Muslim conservatives, is that they distract Muslims from the remembrance, worship, and the love of God. Many religious leaders say frankly that the best thing to do with local culture and traditional arts is "*dibasmi secara arif*", which means literally to "destroy them wisely" ("wisely" here means without violence.) The philosophical basis of this attitude is the principle that "after the truth [of religion], all else is error."

I worry about these practices, because they are detrimental to the pluralistic democracy needed to manage a society as diverse as Indonesia. This concern prompted me to join the new movement steered by progressive Muslims within the Muhammadiyah body to facilitate the development of religious thought that is inclusive, progressive, and capable of responding to the contemporary challenges. One of the aims of this movement is to challenge the notion that Islam is Arab; to break the monopoly of Arab Islam. This movement believes that transferring Islam blindly from the Arabian desert to green Indonesia will only lead to increased friction between institutional religion and local culture.

With Muhammadiyah's numerous schools and educational institutions, I thus see an opportunity to work with Muhammadiyah from within for positive social change through education. I try to integrate my scholarship with activism, because the two can inform and empower each other to accelerate positive social transformation in the Indonesian communities.

Responding to problems I stated earlier, through the Center for the Study of Culture and Social Change, we designed the Arts Appreciation Program under a central theme "Muslim Tolerance and Appreciation for Multiculturalism". The Arts Appreciation program is an operational complement to a counterpart program of religious discussions among religious leaders to revisit established Islamic decrees, particularly those that are inimical to pluralism.

The Arts Appreciation Program addresses the issue of cultural difference by acquainting schoolchildren directly with local and traditional arts (especially the ones not expressly Islamic in character or function). It is an effort to teach the practice of local, secular traditions of music, dance, and theater in Islamic primary

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schools as a mean of introducing children to the richness of local culture without evaluating it for its religious content. This program is conducted in collaboration with tertiary institutions or Conservatory for Indonesian Arts (STSI) in Solo (Middle Java) and Padang Panjang (West Sumatra). The purpose of this collaboration is two-fold: first, to provide art tutors for the teaching of art appreciation in the classrooms; and second, to establish a foothold in the conservatories themselves for the training of teachers who can present traditional arts to children. This assures us of an adequate supply of teachers for our program in the future.

The Arts Appreciation Program was launched in early 2002. We initially conducted extra-curricular programs in only 3 participating primary schools in Solo, and now we are expanding the program to 12 schools in two different provinces, namely Middle Java and West Sumatra. The program meets 2 hours a week after school hours to give Muslim students opportunities to "befriend (traditional) arts". The students experience, experiment, play, communicate, having dialog with, and actualize themselves through arts. Although currently we also expand our outreach to other Islamic organizations and schools, we still maintain our focus on Muhammadiyah since many noted that Muhammadiyah has exhibited the most "antagonistic" attitude towards local culture and traditional arts.

We target children at the elementary-school level, because this age sets the foundation for future character development. The Arts Appreciation Program also offers opportunity for creative development—something difficult to obtain through the current educational system which emphasizes rote learning, uniformity, and cognitive intelligence over understanding, freedom of expression, and emotional intelligence. In children, remains much hope for change, so this program represents a long-term investment in human resources. However, for this pilot project, in order to avoid unnecessary controversy, we have chosen traditional arts that do not glaringly conflict with basic Islamic doctrine, namely, belief in one God. We also target the community surrounding these schools, made up of parents, teachers, social institutions and other related educational systems.

The rationale behind this program is that we see arts, among others, as a symbol of cultural diversity. For Muslim communities, to deal with traditional arts is to deal with difference, and familiarity with those arts challenges attitudes of intolerance towards the cultures that produce them. Our program attempts to make connection between arts and tolerance explicit and operational. The program's unique position is that it has been created from inside one of the most influential Muslim institutions with the aim of addressing and changing that institution's own attitudes towards local culture.

We offer an alternative view from the one offered through dogmatic, divisive religious education, which has created intolerance and hatred on religious grounds. We hope that the Arts Appreciation Program will stimulate religious institutions and schools to modify their philosophical positions and dogmatic teachings in order to acknowledge cultural identity and human rights, as well as to promote freedom of expression and creativity.

We can already see some changes as a result of our Arts Appreciation Program. There are now extra-curricular programs of traditional arts in participating Islamic schools and madrasahs. Such programs did not exist before the initiative. The results of the program evaluation show that schoolchildren who participate in this program are highly enthusiastic and are having a great time with traditional arts. What is more, to our own surprise, the community surrounding the schools such as teachers, parents and relevant social and educational institutions are very supportive of the program. We are therefore very encouraged, and now we not only hope but expect that the Arts Appreciation Program will thrive in the future.::

Catatan:

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