

Presence and Power of the Arab Idiom in Indonesian Islamic Musical Arts

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Good morning. The topic of my paper today is the use of Arab culture in Indonesian Islamic expression. I first became interested in this topic during my Ph.D. research in North Sulawesi, Indonesia. During this research, I noticed that when I came across Arab music, this music was most often found within Islamic contexts. I dedicated a chapter of my dissertation to exploring this phenomenon and began to discover the somewhat less-obvious reasons as to why Arab-sounding music holds Islamic symbolism for many non-Arab Indonesian Muslims. I hope today that, as a group, we can share our thoughts and experiences with this and similar topics.

Islam in Indonesia is quite diverse. The majority of Indonesian Muslims consider themselves Sunni. Sufi practices, as well as local syncretic religious practices, can also be found across the archipelago. Most of my research on the use of Arab music and Arab styles in Indonesian Islamic culture dealt with urban Islamic communities and national media forms in Indonesia. As I will present later in this paper, not all Indonesian Muslims adopt Arab culture into their Islamic musical practices; some, in fact, oppose it.

Arab Indonesians and *Orkes Gambus*

My Ph.D. research focused on the music of Arab Indonesians, so let me start there. Arab Indonesians are descendents of Hadrami-Arab traders (from what is now Yemen), who migrated to Southeast Asia over the course of several centuries. Today, Arab-Indonesian communities can be found in urban areas across Indonesia. *Gambus*, the musical genre most closely associated with Arab-Indonesian communities, is the name of a wooden lute found in both Malaysia and Indonesia, but the term is also used generically to describe a small ensemble that incorporates the *gambus* instrument.¹

Although it is commonly accepted that the *gambus* instrument is not an instrument indigenous to Southeast Asia, scholars have debated the ancestry of the *gambus*. Jaap Kunst notes two forms of the instrument (whose name he claims derives from the East African *gabbus*) found in early 20th century Java, one of Hadrami ancestry and another of Hijaz ancestry (Kunst 1973:373). Christian Poché links the *gambus* with the Southern Arabian *qanbus*, a short necked lute with three double and one single string widely disseminated throughout Southeast Asia and Africa (Poché 1984:168). Curt Sachs and Henry Farmer traced the names *gambus* and *qanbus* to the Turkish *qopuz* (see Sachs 1923, Farmer 1978). The *gambus* instrument often used today closely resembles the

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¹ The term *gambus* is also used as a general term to denote a plucked instrument. The Indonesian language bible uses the term in its translation of Psalm 108: 2, "Bangunlah, hai *gambus* dan kecapi, aku mau membangunkan fajar" (*Alkitab* 1990:672). The English version of this psalm is: "Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn" (*The Holy Bible, New International Version* 1978:691). This phrase is also used in Psalm 57:8.

Egyptian *'ud*,² however various forms of the *gambus* instrument can be found throughout the Indonesian archipelago, making it difficult to declare a single organological history. Although, most authors agree that the instrument spread throughout the archipelago with the spread of Islam.



Figure 1. "Arab" [left] and Regional [right] *Gambus* Instruments.
Note that the Arab *gambus* resembles a *'ud*. The term *'ud* is not common in Indonesia.

Gambus music styles can be broken down into two main categories, regional *gambus* styles and Arab *gambus* styles (also called *orkes gambus* or simply denoted as *o.g.*).³ Both of these categories are my own. The term *gambus* by itself is often used to describe either genre; the context in which the term is used clarifies which style a person is referring to. In this paper the main focus of discussion is the latter category, Arab *gambus*.



Figure 2. *Orkes Gambus* Ensemble. "Arab" *Gambus*.

² Charles Capwell suggests that these traditional *gambus* instruments were replaced by the Egyptian *'ud* around the time Egyptian film was widely disseminated throughout Southeast Asia (Capwell 1995:81). Poché notes that in recent decades the Yemeni *qanbus* has had to compete with the strong influence of the *'ud* in Yemen (Poché 1984:169). Phillip Schuyler also notes that the Yemeni lute, the *turbi*, has also been replaced by the Egyptian lute in recent years (Schuyler 1990:60). Egyptianization, therefore, struck the Arab world as well as Southeast Asia.

³ Similar to *zapin* genres in Malaysia discussed by Nor, which are discussed in terms of *zapin melayu* and *zapin arab* (Nor 1993:1).

Arab *gambus* or *orkes gambus*,⁴ is an ensemble incorporating the *gambus* lute (almost always the modern 'ud form) and various forms of small handheld drums (including *tamtam*, *dumbuk*, and *marwas*). Modern *orkes gambus* ensembles also incorporate the guitar, bass, and electric keyboard (which can produce the sounds of instruments such as the *qanun*, *nay*, and violin).

Orkes gambus ensemble music in Indonesia has three types of music and dance styles (see also Capwell 1995): *zafin*, *sarah*, and *zahefe*. Although in the past, *orkes gambus* ensemble songs were sholawat religious texts or Hadrami-Arab folk songs, today's *orkes gambus* songs are mostly arrangements of Arab pop songs found and copied from Arab pop music cassettes imported into Indonesia. Arab pop music recordings are often sold on VCDs (Video Compact Discs, currently the most popular and most affordable form of music and video distribution in Indonesia) in street markets.

Orkes gambus musicians that I met during my fieldwork chose Arab pop songs that they enjoyed, transcribed the Arabic lyrics, and arranged the songs into *orkes gambus* drumming patterns. As few Arab-Indonesians today speak modern colloquial Arabic, the literal meaning of these texts is often lost as transcriptions of are often incorrect. In the following example, *Nawwarti Ayyami*, for instance, the Arabic text is unclear. This song, quite popular among North Sulawesi *orkes gambus* groups, is from El Bass's 2003 Album "The Best of El Bass 2003." The song, from what I have been told by Arabic speakers, is in the Egyptian dialect of Arabic.

Nawwarti ayyami ragga'ti ahlami	You brightened my days, you brought back my dreams
Ghayyarti lon wuta'wu sakel'il haya	(You changed the color, the taste, and the form of life)
Allah...Allah...Allah...Ya Allah Allah 3x	Allah...Allah...Allah...Ya Allah Allah 3x
Allah gab ainak fa a'ini (Habibi...)	Allah has made us see each other, my love
Allah gama'beinak wu baini (Habibi)	Allah has brought us together, my love

Table 1. Song text excerpt and translation of "Nawwarti Ayyami," by O.G. El Bass.

Arabic transcription as found in liner notes.

Estimated translation by Mirena Christof, Lecturer of Arabic language, Brown University.

Orkes Gambus Outside Arab Contexts

In modern Arab-Indonesian communities the performance of *orkes gambus* music remains a celebratory tradition, often performed during Arab wedding festivities. Although *orkes gambus* music is an important part of Arab-Indonesian tradition,

⁴ *Orkes gambus* is also sometimes simply called *gambus*, causing it to be confused with regional *gambus* music genres. The term *gambus* means many things in Indonesia. It can refer to a plucked instrument, the traditional Hadrami-derived instrument, the modern 'ud instrument, a form of regional singing and dance, or Arab-Indonesian *orkes gambus* ensemble music and dance. For clarification, when I discuss Arab *gambus* music, I will refer to it as *orkes gambus*.

Muslims across Indonesia who are not of Arab descent also perform and consume *orkes gambus* music. However, in these cases, the music is almost always performed within Islamic contexts.

In North Sulawesi, my fieldwork site, *orkes gambus* music is part of community religious life in many Muslim communities. Often youth organizations of mosques (known as *remaja masjid*) form *orkes gambus* groups or practice and perform *orkes gambus* dance genres (including *zafin*, *sarah*, and *zahefe* dance styles) to popular *orkes gambus* recordings. *Orkes gambus* is also performed at programs that celebrate the beginning or end of the fasting month Ramadan.

My most memorable “religious” performance of *orkes gambus* music in North Sulawesi, however, was at an inter-religious dialogue held at the governor’s residence and with the theme “Strengthen Harmony and Solidarity among Religious Groups.”⁵ During the course of this evening program, representatives from several religions were invited to speak and perform as a means to promote religious understanding and tolerance. Performances of Handel’s Hallelujah chorus by a local church choir and Arab popular love songs performed by the *orkes gambus* group As-sahara alternated with speeches and prayers by Christian, Catholic, and Islamic community leaders. Along with Quranic recitation, *orkes gambus* was incorporated as part of the Islamic portion of the program.



Figure 3. Images from inter-religious dialogue night in Manado, Indonesia with *orkes gambus* and church choir performances.

⁵ The Indonesian title of the program was “Mantapkan Kerukunan dan Solidaritas antar Umat Beragama.”

Orkes gambus is also associated with Islamic culture on national television. *Orkes gambus* music is often shown on the TVRI national television station during the holy month of Ramadan as part of special *hiburan* (entertainment) shows. In these programs, musicians are almost always dressed in Islamic clothing. Performances are aired regularly on Fridays following several Islamic discussion programs, such as the show *Mutiara Jumat* (“Friday Pearl”), a women’s Islamic discussion show. On this show, *orkes gambus* is introduced along with *nasyid* as *musik rohani* (spiritual music) and performances of both genres typically close the show.⁶

Commercially *orkes gambus* music is even sold under the category of Islamic/religious music, strengthening its association with popular Indonesian Islamic musical arts. I found this to be the case both in street stalls selling this music as well as in major music store chains, such as Disc Tarra, that I visited in several cities throughout Sulawesi and Java. It is even sold (along with other Islamic popular music) at music and book stalls in front of mosques.

Although often performed and marketed in Islamic contexts, *orkes gambus*’ role as an Islamic genre nevertheless remains ambiguous. *Orkes gambus* is often identified as part of the Islamic arts realm in Indonesia, but not all Indonesians identify *orkes gambus* music as Islamic music. *Orkes gambus* is also described as mere entertainment music. Some do not like it because it is too fast, loud, and boisterous to be serious Islamic music, and others are not comfortable with the secular Arabic lyrics of modern *orkes gambus* repertoire. These lyrics are mysterious to many, as only Indonesians that have studied modern Arabic language can understand them. Others simply state that *orkes gambus* music is not their style, is just plain silly (*humoris*), or is “Arab ethnic music” (*musik etnis Arab*).⁷

The Place of *Orkes Gambus* on the Indonesian Islamic Musical Spectrum

One way to clarify *orkes gambus*’ ambiguous role in Indonesian Islamic musical arts is to compare it with other forms of popular Islamic arts in Indonesia. In my dissertation, I compared *orkes gambus* music to Indonesian musical genres of *nasyid*, *lagu-lagu sholawat* (or *sholawat* songs), and *qasidah modéren*, and the recordings of artists such as *Debu* and *Jefri Al-Buchori*.

One reoccurring theme that runs through these various Indonesian Islamic genres mentioned is that of *dakwah*, and these styles of music are often referred to as *musik dakwah Islami*. *Dakwah* is the act of teaching about Islam and it is a powerful and legitimizing word in Islamic communities as performing *dakwah* is considered to be an act of reverence to God. The texts and religious message, or *dakwah*, are what make these musical styles powerful and important in popular Islamic music expression in

⁶ Barendregt and Zanten note: “‘Spiritual songs’ (*lagu rohani*) is the general Indonesian term for religious songs, although as a marketing label the term has largely been reserved for Christian popular songs (Barendregt and Zanten 2002:76).

⁷ Arab-Indonesians—who most often perform this music—are typically viewed within two opposing frameworks as either pious teachers of Islam or greedy traders and merchants. This vague definition of *gambus* is also present amongst Arab-Indonesians. Many of my research consultants described *gambus* music as entertainment music appropriate for wedding celebrations and described it as an Arab-Indonesian tradition. However, many of the younger performers and fans that I encountered in Arab communities described the instruments and musical genre of *gambus* as associated with Islam.

Indonesia as well as make these musical styles important players in the commercial Indonesian music industry.⁸

Is *orkes gambus* music also *dakwah* music? In general the answer is “No.” It is not described as proselytizing music with the goal of educating about Islam, but rather it is most often described ambiguously as “music with a religious feel.” The issue of Arabic lyrics places *orkes gambus* music in a strange position. Often people do not understand the lyrics of modern *orkes gambus* songs at all, sometimes not even the performers, and *orkes gambus* songs are often secular love songs with no function or role in teaching about Islam. *Orkes gambus* singer and Arab-Indonesian descendent Nizar Ali described to me:

...in general, people here don't understand Arabic...So I say “habibi habibi,” which actually means “my dear, my dear”...they think it is a religious praise... [Nizar sings] “*Allah, Allah, Allah, Allah...Ya Allah*”...Children say “that song sounds Islamic”... “it's not Islamic” I say to them...non-Muslims also say “Allah.”⁹

Although his music is marketed to Muslim audiences as well as Arab-Indonesian audiences, Nizar rejects *orkes gambus*' association with Islamic culture because of its secular (non-*dakwah*) texts.

Many Indonesian Muslims who listen to and perform *orkes gambus* music hold an ambivalent attitude towards *orkes gambus* lyrics that today are often secular, not sacred. In regard to lyrics, Charles Capwell notes in his article on *gambus* music that the Arabic texts of *orkes gambus* songs have a nostalgic quality, reminding Muslims of their Arabic religious lessons as children (Capwell 1995). And indeed, in Indonesia the Arabic language is identified with Islam; sounding and reading the Arabic of the Qur'an is after all fundamental to Islamic worship for all Muslims. Often the meaning of Arabic lyrics in *orkes gambus* songs is overlooked or ignored in favor of the positive Islamic aura that the Arabic language provides.

It is precisely this ambivalence towards *orkes gambus* lyrics that explains why the music is not clearly labeled Islamic. In regards to *orkes gambus*, Islamic sholawat reciter Haddad Alwi notes, “Indonesians are confused with *gambus*. Arabic language doesn't mean it's Islamic. Islam isn't only Arab.”¹⁰ Most *musik islami* artists do not sing mainstream secular songs. However, *orkes gambus* song texts today are predominantly secular.

⁸ William Frederick noted a “Moslem revival” since 1975, in which “*dakwah* music—and not only of the dangdut variety—has turned out to be big commercial business. A certain vogue has even developed for “Islamic boutique” fashions and for making the pilgrimage to Mecca (as a parade of pop stars has done since 1977)—something very difficult to imagine earlier in Indonesian history” (Frederick 1982:129). *Orkes gambus* music is not yet a large commercial business, but it is growing, with some *orkes gambus* music sold in Disc Tarra commercial recording stores.

⁹ “Umumnya orang sini tidak mengerti bahasa Arab. ..Jadi saya bilang habibi, habibi, padahal kekasih kekasih...mereka anggap itu pujian ...Allah, Allah, Allah, Allah, ya Allah...anak-anak kecil bilang ‘lagu itu berwarna Islam’ ...‘bukan Islam’ saya bilang... non-muslim, mereka bilang Allah sama kaya gitu ‘Allah’ sama.” Nizar Ali, interview (Surabaya, May 4, 2006).

¹⁰ “Orang Indonesia racu dengan *gambus*. Berbahasa Arab tidak berarti Islam. Islam bukan cuma Arab.” Haddad Alwi, interview (Manado, October 26, 2005).

So, where is *orkes gambus*' place on the Islamic musical spectrum? It is a genre from the Middle East, the homeland of Islam, but it is not necessarily Islamic. So, why does it fit in with Islamic arts?

Orkes Gambus' Appeal as an Islamic Arts Genre

One attraction of *orkes gambus* music as an Islamic musical art in Indonesia is its use of *maqam*, familiar to Indonesian ears from Quranic recitation that has grown in popularity over the past decades. It is also important to note that the *gambus* instrument has been ascribed Islamic cultural symbolism throughout Indonesia. However, many performers of *orkes gambus* music have described the music to me as acceptable within Islamic culture because it is *halal*, or permitted under Islamic law. This term is a powerful index of appropriate and acceptable behavior in Indonesian Islam. This *halal*-ness often relates to the manner in which the music is displayed—Islamic clothing is often worn, *aurat* or indecent areas of the body are covered, and men and women are often separated. Musicians are almost always male; female singers are sometimes permitted, but they are either well-respected older female singers dressed in Islamic style clothing or they are a group of back up singers also dressed in Islamic style clothing and segregated to the side of the *orkes gambus* group itself. Although many *orkes gambus* music texts may be secular Arab love/pop songs, oftentimes the secular nature of the song texts can also be overlooked in favor of the *halal* manner in which the music is displayed.

Orkes gambus' association with *halal*-ness is also strengthened by its association with Arab-Indonesian ethnic communities. Arab-Indonesians were known as teachers and proselytizers of Islam for centuries. To this day they hold important roles in Islamic communities in Indonesia and are often described as "*soleh*" (pious). Moreover, early Arab-Indonesian *gambus* performers incorporated a number of *sholawat* religious texts, solidifying the association of Arab-Indonesian music performances with Islamic expression. Nizar describes,

They were already familiar with song "A" for example, from the era of Segaf Assegaf. Of course (Segaf's) Islamic poems praised Muhammad, poems that were of undeniable religious character. Then when the same style of sound (*gambus*) surfaced again, this time introduced by me, they thought I was an Islamic singer, but that's not true.¹¹

Many Arab-Indonesian *orkes gambus* musicians themselves, such as Nizar, deny their adopted role as religious singers and symbols. However, their association as Arabs with Islam nevertheless remains strong.

Arab Aesthetics and Islam

As technology and transportation have increased over the past century, Indonesian contact with Mecca and with Arab culture has sharply risen. For many Indonesian

¹¹ "Mereka sudah terlanjur kenal misalnya lagu a, misalnya, jaman pada saat Segaf Assegaf masih ada. Memang syair itu memuji ke Nabi, syair-syar yang benar-benar religious sifatnya. Kemudian dengan model notasi yang hampir sama timbul lagi di tahun ini yang bawa ini saya. Mereka anggap Nizar Islami, padahal tidak." Nizar Ali, interview (Surabaya, May 4, 2006).

Muslims, Mecca is the one area of the world with which they most closely identify; it is the spiritual homeland of Islam towards which all Muslims pray. With a rise in pilgrimages to Mecca, Indonesians have shown increased identification with and nostalgia for Arab culture, which has grown into a marker of Islamic authenticity. Arab music remains a strong symbol of the geographic center of Islam.

“Arabization” trends in Indonesian Islamic culture have been frequently seen over the past decades in language and vocabulary used by Muslims, clothing, and even in architecture. Words such as *ustaz* (teacher), *madrassa* (school), and *sholat* (worship) carry strict Islamic connotations in Indonesia (as well as in other non-Arab countries).¹² Use of the head scarf (known as a *jilbab* in Indonesia), which is “not really Islamic...but is instead Arab,” is more common now than a few decades ago (Brenner 1996:674). And modern buildings, even the famous Istiqlal Mosque in the national capital, Jakarta, exhibit Middle Eastern arch and dome forms, forms that Hugh O’Neil describes as “alien ‘pan-Islamic’ forms” in Southeast Asia (O’Neil 1993:162).

Of course the acceptance of the “Arab sound” as “Islamic sound” is not universal across Indonesia. *Orkes gambus* and things “Arab” can be rejected as foreign elements that unfairly challenge local culture. As Farha Daulima, cultural preservationist from the Indonesian region of Gorontalo, described to me, the assumption of Muslims in general is that the center of Islamic culture is the Arab world. However, she goes on to say,

...but if we copy Arab culture, I’m not saying it is wrong, but it would be best if we took Arab culture and filled it with Gorontalo character...It all depends on how we negotiate between Arab culture and our own culture. We don’t have to use songs in Arabic...local artists aren’t focused on copying Arab culture but are focused on modifying arts to have an Islamic feel but not necessarily by using Arabic language. *Pantun* here don’t use Arabic. Unless we are reading from the Qur’an or reading zikir, then we use Arabic.¹³

Local Islamic expressive arts are forced to negotiate with the strong influence of the Arab idiom and international Islamic modernity.

¹² Munim adds, “This is continued with the strictness in the use of local terminology for phrases such as *shaum*, *shalat*, or *dien*, as alternate terms for *puasa*, *sembahyang* or *agama*, because these phrases aren’t considered Islamic (Arab). No matter that non-Muslim Arabs, even pagans, Jews or Christians use these terms everyday.”/ “Hal itu juga dilanjutkan dengan keketatan dalam penggunaan terminologi lokal untuk beberapa istilah seperti *shaum*, *shalat*, atau *dien*, sebagai pengganti istilah *puasa*, *sembahyang* atau *agama*, karena istilah ini tidak dianggap islam (Arab). Terlepas bahwa orang Arab non-Muslim, baik pagan, Yahudi atau Nasrani menggunakan istilah tersebut dalam perbincangan sehari-hari”(Munim 2003:3).

¹³ Jadi kalau kita meniru budaya-budaya Arab, bagi saya pribadi saya katakan tidak salah, tapi alangkah bagusnya budaya-budaya arab itu kita bikin dalam nuansa budaya gorontalo...Itu tinggal bagamiana kita memodifikasi antara budaya arab dan budaya kita. Tidak perlu kita ambil lagu-lagu dalam bahasa arab...sumber daya manusia yang di bidang kesenian itu tidak terlalu terfokus untuk meniru dari arab tapi dia memodifikasi sehinga kesenian di sini bernuansa islam tetapi tidak selamanya memakai bahasa arab. *Pantun-pantun* di sini tidak ada bahasa arab. Kecuali kita mengaji alkoran, kecuali kita berzikir, pakai bahasa Arab.” Farha Daulima, interview (Gorontalo, July 25, 2005).

“Purifikasi/Arabisasi” Islam versus “Pribumisasi Islam”

The simultaneous acceptance and rejection of Arab culture in Indonesian Islamic expressive arts cannot be separated from recent debates among Islamic scholars and leaders in Indonesia over what has been labeled “pribumisasi Islam” (indigenized Islam) versus “purifikasi/Arabisasi Islam” (purification/Arabization of Islam).

In reaction to what they label purification trend in Indonesian Islam, some Islamic clerics and scholars, such as Abdurahman Wahid, head of the Islamic organization Nahdlatul Ulama, have promoted “indigenous Islam” (*pribumisasi Islam*). Under such a system, local Islamic traditions, even those with syncretic pre-Islamic roots, gain respect and legitimacy, rather than being labeled “sesat, musyrik, atau bid’ah” (“misled, polytheist, or heresy”) (Munim 2003:7). Proponents of “pribumisasi Islam” often justify their position by drawing examples from the highly-respected and admired Walisongo of Indonesia, who are considered the first men to bring Islam to the island of Java. Often mythologized, their graves remain holy Islamic sites in Indonesia today.¹⁴ During their proselytization of Java, it is said that the Walisongo used Javanese culture, such as *wayang kulit* and the *gamelan*, to promote their teachings (See Rahmat 2003:10-11).

Proponents of “indigenous Islam” argue that by demanding that Indonesian Islam adhere to the pure form of Islam found in the *Sunnah* texts, that in essence Wahhabist-influenced groups are demanding that Indonesians adopt Arab culture and traditions. The process of “purifikasi Islam,” therefore, is also referred to as “Arabisasi.”¹⁵

These critics of an “Arabization” of Islam in Indonesia offer many examples of how the purifist/Wahhabi influence has already crept into Indonesian Islamic culture. Abdul Munim offers examples of two separate Islamic events in Indonesia, a national *zikir* program, and an NU-sponsored prayer reading (called *Istighotsah*). In the *zikir* event, the participants wearing a *jubah* (an Arab-style head covering) indicated the Arab orientation (*orientasi Arab*) of the event and implied a rejection of regional clothing styles.¹⁶ At the prayer reading event, participants wore local Islamic clothing styles, which Munim interprets as an implication of pluralism, one of the core national themes of the Indonesian Republic.

The use of Arab symbols in Indonesian Islamic expression, therefore, is not something that has gone unnoticed in Indonesian Islamic circles. These critics of pure, or “Arab,” forms of Islam, as they call them, seek to promote Indonesian Islam as a

¹⁴ I was fortunate to visit the cemetery of the Walisongo known as Sunan Ampel in Surabaya. His grave is located in what is now the Arab quarter of the city. While I was there, there was a large parade and several days of prayers marking the birthday of Sunan Ampel. Many local Javanese Muslims sat and prayed in front of Sunan Ampel’s grave, one form of Islamic syncretic practice in Indonesia that is highly criticized by “purifikasi Islam” proponents, as such practice of grave worship exhibits pre-Islamic influence.

¹⁵ Rahmat notes that “Arabization, or the process of identifying oneself with Middle Eastern culture, has already torn us from the roots of our own culture.” / “Arabisasi atau proses mengidentifikasi diri dengan budaya Timur Tengah adalah tercabutnya kita dari akar budaya kita sendiri” (Rahmat 2003:9). He also notes that “Purification of Islam, that rejects all local flavor from Islam, in the end a process of Javanization and Melayuization has changed into the process of Arabization.” / “...puritanisasi Islam,-- yang menolak seluruh warna lokal dari Islam, akhirnya proses Jawanisasi, Melayuisasi—berhenti diganti dengan proses Arabisasi” (Munim 2003:5).

¹⁶ Munim remarks “Wearing the jubah (Arab clothing) indicated one is oriented toward Arab-ness.” / “penggunaan jubah (pakaian Arab) menunjukkan indikasi adanya orientasi Arabisme yang tinggi dengan implikasi penolakan terhadap pakaian lokal atau varian pakaian lainnya” (Munim 2003:3).

legitimate and important part of the history of Islam, rather than emphasizing only that Arab Islam was an important part of the history of Indonesia. Munim, for instance, declares that Indonesian cultural heritage is an element of Islamic cultural heritage as a whole and is therefore undeniably legitimate (Munim 2003:7).¹⁷ As such debates of the role of foreign cultural elements in Indonesian Islamic expression continue, the prominence and prestige of Arab symbols (such as Arab music) in Indonesian Islamic arts is likely to change.¹⁸

Critiques of the heavy influence of Arab culture on non-Arab Islamic societies are not confined to Indonesia, and the use of Arab culture in Islamic practice is a point of tension in other non-Arab Islamic cultures. In an article titled “Stop ‘Arabising’ Malay culture,” the Malaysian Arts, Culture and Heritage Minister (Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim) notes:

The Malays are not Arabs. Therefore, it is important that we do not “Arabise” the Malay culture to the extent that everything that the Arabs do, we must do...That’s not to say I hold contra-views against the Arab culture. In fact, the Arab world has many aspects that have benefited and enriched the world in terms of medicine, art, poetry and so on...But the community should not be influenced to the extent that they are blinded into thinking that all that is Arabic is good for them (Wong 2004).

Minister Yatim goes on to defend Malaysian traditions such as *wayang kulit* that had been criticized as non-Islamic. He notes: “We just, in chorus, say ‘Aha, perhaps so’ but we never fight back to say that this is a deep-rooted tradition of the Malays since time immemorial. ‘Put to us which (Islamic) tenet is being violated.’ Nobody says that” (Wong 2004).

Other discourse on Islamic culture in non-Arab Muslim nations that I have come across purports not to regain lost arts but rather to distance these cultures from modern Islamic fundamentalism. In an internet posting “Islam and Bangladesh: A Non-Arab Muslim majority country,” Barun ur Rashid notes: “The purpose of this paper is to show by an empirical analysis that the overwhelming majority of Bangladeshi Muslims are tolerant with people of other faiths because of the deeply held secular values, culture and traditions of the land” (Rashid 2005). In forming his argument, Rashid uses cultural

¹⁷ “This also assumes that the legacy of Indonesian culture legitimately is part of the legacy of Islamic culture. Indonesian historical experience, from pre-Islam to the time of Islam, needs to be integrated into Islamic history itself.” / “Ini juga mengandaikan bahwa warisan budaya Indonesia ini juga merupakan warisan kebudayaan Islam yang sah. Pengalaman sejarah Indonesia baik pra-Islam hingga zaman Islam perlu diintegrasikan ke dalam pengalaman sejarah Islam sendiri” (Munim 2003:7).

¹⁸ In fact, new genres of Southeast Asian popular Islamic arts, such as *nasyid*, help define regional Islamic identities. Artist such as Raihan, a Malaysian group popular in both Malaysia and Indonesia, unite Southeast Asian Muslim audiences, offering what Barendregt describes as “a unique regional transculturalism” and “a style of communication that has attached with its consumption a growing transnational consciousness” (Barendregt 2006:172). The growing popularity of *nasyid* in Indonesia clearly challenges trends in Arabization and reliance on Arab idioms to express Islamic-ness. However, at the same time, the genre avoids any reference to locality, by avoiding the use of any local Islamic art references, beyond the occasional use of rebana drums. This Southeast Asian transnational music, therefore, lies in an undefined space between “Arabisasi” and “pribumisasi.”

examples to stress that Bangladeshi Muslims have not wholeheartedly adopted Arab culture in place of their own. He states:

While we recite the Quranic verses in Arabic, we understand the meaning of the verses through our mother language...Music and dance by girls are perceived as respectable profession calling in Bangladesh. Although Bengali Muslims are steadfast in their faith, some of the social practices they perform are influenced by local culture (Rashid 2005).

Rashid asserts that Bengali Muslims remain pious Muslims through their local-based faith. (I would welcome any of today's audience to share their experiences with similar debates in other non-Arab Islamic cultures.)

Conclusion

Orkes gambus music has been described to me as “an art form of Muslim Arabs in Indonesia that has been adopted as an art form for Indonesian Muslims in general.”¹⁹ To

¹⁹ “Bagian seni orang Arab-Islam menjadi bagian seni orang Islam” Delmus Salim, interview (Manado, August 30, 2005).

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some Indonesian Muslims, it is considered a form of popular Islamic expression. To other Indonesian Muslims, it is merely entertainment music. *Orkes gambus* is not an art form that has a clearly-defined influence on Indonesian Islamic life or practice, but rather it remains a flexible symbol in Indonesian Islamic culture open to diverse types of Indonesian Muslims to accept or reject on their own terms.

Orkes gambus music, when accepted into the Islamic realm, remains a powerful symbol of the religious prestige ascribed to Arab culture in Indonesian Islamic arts. However, the fact that it is also rejected by many modern artists illustrates a struggle in Indonesian Islam to legitimate and distinguish itself culturally in the international Islamic community. As the largest nation of Muslims in the world, Indonesia need not adopt Arab culture in Islamic expression, but rather Indonesia stands to play a major role in the changing face of international Islamic artistic expression as a whole.

Thank you.

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