Speaking American in Indonesian
Islamic Boarding Schools

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY
Tim S. Pappa lived in and toured clusters of pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) across Java, Indonesia, from September 2005 to May 2006. In West Java Pappa 'shadowed' a kyai (pesantren director), and studied regional networking; in East Java he examined internal communicative processes within a large pesantren complex. Pappa will graduate with an MA in Southeast Asian Studies from Ohio University in June 2007.

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For 37 days, for example, I accompanied a particular West Java kyai (with whom I lived at Pondok Pesantren Al-Mizan, in Jatiwangi, Majalengka, West Java) to more than 25 regional and local pengajian (Qur’anic-based sermons held in mosques and pesantren and neighborhoods) and related events. In Cirebon, West Java, about an hour from PP Al-Mizan, I observed processes of a pesantren-affiliated Muslim non-governmental organization (Fahmina Institute), staffed by kyai and former pesantren students.

In Tambakberas, Jombang, East Java, I lived in Pondok Pesantren As-Sa‘idiyah I within Pondok Pesantren Bahrul Ulum, a large complex composed of 27 pesantren ‘dorms’ and 15 state or private madrasah ‘modern day schools’, and a nursing academy and two second-tier universities; near PP Bahrul Ulum were several other substantive clusters of pesantren and madrasah in Jombang (e.g. Pondok Pesantren Tebuireng, Pondok Pesantren Dahrul Ulum).

In each research locale I regularly spoke to various audiences of pesantren and madrasah students and Javanese Muslims, about Americans and myself (e.g. pluralistic communities, freedoms, choice). In subsequent text I include vignettes of my initial (unintended) enculturation with a particular West Java kyai, who urged me to speak with him at underground punk rock concerts and radio talk-shows and seminars; and without him, speaking to thousands in various East Java pesantren.

On 10 February 2006 I accompanied Kyai Haji (KH) Maman Imanulhaq Faqieh to Pondok Pesantren Al-Munawar Al-Zarnujiyah in Tasikmalaya, West Java, a city of about 700 pesantren. He spoke, and I sat, crowded by about 300 students. I was asked about research funds, and the CIA; girls quickly snapped cell photographs, ran off. Most students stared, and whispered. KH Maman mentioned the United States, and the crowd howled. Many students laughed and grum-
bled; other attendees shouted in the local dialect (Sundanese), and looked at me.

KH Maman (with whom I lived at PP Al-Mizan, about four hours away) recited Qur’anic *surah* (verses); a majority of students bellowed “Allah!” in response. Midnight neared. In previous days KH Maman and I had attended multiple late-night *pengajian* (Qur’anic-based sermons), sometimes back-to-back, far from PP Al-Mizan. I was tired, of travel, and celebrity. I was agitated by students’ overt suspicion (relatively rare in *pesantren*), and upset by a large poster of Osama bin Laden, unruly shouts upon reference of New York City or the United States; I did not understand Sundanese. In my field notes I wrote and imagined negative things about fundamentalists.

KH Maman, meanwhile, discussed pluralism, inclusiveness. “*Kita berbeda*” (“We are different”), he said, smiling. In jest he mocked students’ laughs, outfits, and himself. KH Maman talked about *ikhlas* (sincerity), in school, and homework assignments; he urged friendship and peace. They were just kids.

KH Maman and I had spoken weeks earlier at a seminar titled *Terrorisme dan Budaya* (“Terrorism and Culture”), hosted by second-tier Muslim university Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Shalahuddin Al-Ayyubi (STAINA), at Pondok Pesantren Ulumuddin in Babakan, Cirebon, West Java, about 20 minutes from PP Al-Mizan. A majority of the 120 attendees read distributed copies of my paper (“*Saya Hanya Orang Amerika, Tidak Lebih*,” or “I’m Only an American, Nothing More”) during pre-seminar formalities; I spoke briefly, about American religiosity, pluralisms.

STAINA students (some PP Ulumuddin ‘boarders’) in particular asked about Muslims in the United States; I mentioned millions, inclusiveness. A STAINA student stood, and said in English, “Mister, I wish you were the president of America.” Many chuckled; I smiled. Then for about 10 minutes he chided U.S. foreign policies, President Bush. A nearby STAINA student questioned Muslims’ acceptance of aid from non-Muslim nations, tsunami relief. A *kyai* was asked about hegemonic news media association of Islam and violence; “it is clear” from Qur’anic content that Muslims oppose conflict, the student said. I added, “It’s not clear. Most [non-Muslim] Americans have jobs and families and errands. They are busy. ‘Islam’ is just a brief news article, a TV news blurb, usually about violence. Americans don’t know any Muslims. They don’t care. They don’t want violence or war; but they don’t care.” Attendees were quiet, as if hurt. Later, I asked attendees about Indonesian Muslims’ “obsession” with other Muslims, in Iraq and Afghanistan and Bosnia; I pointed outside PP Ulumuddin, and mentioned unemployment, poverty. Attendees muttered, smoked.

Later I was crowded, praised. I was ushered to prepared food. I posed for photographs, exchanged cell numbers. A STAINA student gave me a ‘thumbs up’, and said, “*Amerika bagus, bagus*” (“America is great, great”).

First days

About a hundred *santri* (male *pesantren* students) eyed me from several tiered balconies at Pondok Pesantren As-Sa’idiyyah I in Jombang, East Java. Groups of *santri* bunched. A few giggled, and hid or scurried away; some waved, and yelled, “Mister, mister!” Others peeked from window slits, from behind pillars.

In my room I stared at the walls, at photographs of past weddings and aged portraits, of the families that have managed Pondok Pesantren Bahrul Ulum, a large complex inclusive of 27 *pesantren* ‘dorms’ (including PP As-Sa’idiyyah I) and 15 *madrasah* ‘modern day schools’ and thousands of students. I intended to examine internal communicative processes, interaction; but after six months of living in and touring various clusters of *pesantren* across Java I still hesitated to again abide celebrity, publicity. I thought about home, and of leaving. For two days I traveled to Jombang, on trains and mini-vans. I stunk of sweat and body odor, I had slept little; already I had met various *pesantren* officials at nearby complexes, and shared tea and silence, sparse conversation. I was agitated by passersby, staring; I was angered by smiles, even smirks. I was in a bad mood.

I sighed. I washed, and changed clothes. I entered the *pesantren* courtyard, smiling; I walked up nearby stairs, and extended my hand. I said my name. A few *santri* woke, bewildered. Some stared at me, and each other. Others rushed me. They asked my age, where I was from. “How many girls you have, mister?” I was asked, in English. We posed for photographs, in groups and one-by-one. I autographed their forearms; I even signed a few Qur’ans. I tried on a white topi haji (a type of skullcap usually worn by Indonesian Muslim
males who have completed the Hajj to Mecca). “Handsome, handsome, mister” a student said. I was given a tour of the pesantren; we shuffled, together. An older santri and I entered the santrivati (female pesantren students) dorm of PP As-Sa’idiyyah One, gated off from santri. Girls screamed; younger santrivati ran off, hurriedly put on jilbabs (Indonesian Muslim female ‘veil’, a pesantren requirement). Several santrivati squirmed, giggled. “Siapa nama kamu?” (“What’s your name?”), I asked a girl, maybe eleven. She stared back, quiet. Girls shouted from a balcony, and waved.

The following morning I interviewed teachers at Madrasah Aliyah Al-F’adariyah Bahrul Ulum (MAI-BU) a private madrasah high school across the street from PP As-Sa’idiyyah I; about 90 percent of MAI-BU curriculum includes Islamic studies, Arabic. I spoke to about 20 santri, too. For about two hours I talked about ice hockey parties at Ohio University (I am a former OU player), Christian friends, losing my virginity in high school, U.S. educational standards, and Wu-Tang Clan rap lyrics; I was sweating, and pacing. They asked about homosexuals, Vietnam War protesters, and former U.S. president John F. Kennedy. Santrivati in the street waved, and yelled, “I miss you, Tim!” and “I’m always with you, Tim.” I had visited PP As-Sa’idiyyah II the previous night, to speak. Santri brought me fruit. I showed photographs of friends and family; a santri asked for my sister’s e-mail address.

In the afternoon about a hundred santri from various pesantren dorms gathered at a nearby soccer field to drill, without coaches. I tended goal, playfully taunting shooters. Later I sat in the shade with other santri, in silence our eyes tailed the ball, and our smiles saluted skillful moves, and scores. Nearby mosque loudspeakers guzzled the call to prayer. Some of us talked about girls, and love.